

MOMENT OF UNTRUTH

ED LACY

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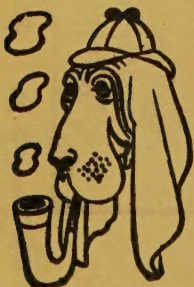
MOMENT OF UNTRUTH

by
ED LACY

Readers of Ed Lacy's award-winning *Room to Swing* will remember Toussaint Moore, the Negro detective—a very tough, real, and likeable character. In this new story Moore is sent to Mexico City to help a rich widow pin her husband's murder on a national hero—a seemingly impossible task for someone who speaks no Spanish and has no official standing in a foreign country.

Moreover, the people Moore teams up with seem to get murdered rather regularly, without the detective getting any closer to the man behind the crimes. So Moore enlists help in an unexpected quarter and what man cannot do in the way of bringing the criminal to justice is done publicly and spectacularly by—a bull!

This is Ed Lacy at his professional best—slick, plausible, always a jump ahead of his readers, bringing Mexico vividly alive, even if some of his characters are even more vividly dead.



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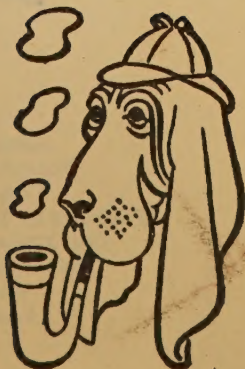
ROOM TO SWING

(Winner of the MWA "Edgar" award)

MOMENT OF UNTRUTH

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MOMENT OF UNTRUTH

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Note : Being a work of fiction all the characters and incidents in this novel are entirely imaginary, and not based upon, nor intended to represent, any actual people; living or dead.

This is a sequel to ROOM TO SWING, winner of the Mystery Writers of America's "EDGAR" for the best mystery novel of 1957.

Chapter 1

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IN THE DARKNESS Frances awoke me with a kiss. We both slept in the raw and as I lazily ran my hand down her smooth back to rest on the strong hip, she suddenly turned over, whispered, "Touie, put your hand here."

"Where?" I mumbled, half opening one eye to glance at the luminous dial of the dresser clock. I had to leave the house by 5.15 a.m. to make 6 o'clock time at the post office. Being a true country gal, Fran always awoke at 4 a.m.—giving us the best half-hour of the entire day for intimate, sleepy talk, and horsing around.

"Honey, here." She gently placed my hand over the soft curve of her belly. "Feel anything different?"

"Satin-smooth and warm as ever. Remember, ma'am, when it comes to your body, you're talking to an old Frances-hand." My fingers raced up to cup her firm breasts.

"Are my breasts fuller, Touie?"

"Wonderful-as ever," I muttered, idly considering whether to make love to my wife. But, magazines were due today, mail be heavy and if I was stuck on a route. . . .

"No difference at all?" Frances pressed both my hands against her bosom.

"I love 'em as they are, always have and always will," I corned, "so help me . . ."

"Touie, darling, I'm pregnant!"

I sat up, coming awake all at once, shivering slightly in the morning cold—or it could have been my shaking nerves. Frances pulled me down, quickly adjusted the blankets to shut out the cold air. Snuggling up against me, she whispered, "Touie, isn't it wonderful, the greatest news? I feel terribly

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proud . . . of myself! Silly, but I really do feel oh, so proud and. . . .”

“Fran, how do you know? Are you sure?” I had a rough time getting the words out of my dry mouth.

“I’m sure. A rabbit told the doctor.”

“What doctor?”

“I saw a doctor yesterday—the second time. Touie, forgive me for not telling you last night but . . . it seemed such a delicious secret, I selfishly wanted to keep it to myself for another few hours. Touie, Touie, you’ve no idea how very pleased I am—with me.” She giggled in the darkness.

“Our own little population explosion.”

“Our baby is no explosion!” Fran said with mock anger, kissing me, her lips hot. “Oh, Touie, are you as thrilled as I am?”

“Yeah. Fran, the doc was absolutely positive?”

“Darling, of course. I’ve been in orbit since he told me.”

I kissed her ear, feeling as if I’d been kicked below the belt. Fran was telling me, “. . . and he said I shouldn’t have the smallest trouble, I’m built to have kids. About time I started having my children, I’m almost 29. . . .”

I lay beside her, dazed, chilled. I tried to think but the only thought which stayed in my groggy head was: it was probably at some other 4 a.m. the kid had been conceived. Damn, what the world needed—one more kid . . . another colored kid!

“ . . . I felt like a pig last night, not telling you the good news, Touie, but I was so darn proud of myself, I couldn’t share the secret. I haven’t even phoned Mama yet. Touie, I can hardly wait to see what our baby will look like! Of course he’ll be tall, a deep brown color and . . .”

Closing her mouth with a kiss, I slipped out of bed.

“I’ll start your coffee.”

I held her under the covers, kissed her flat nose. “No, no, you take your rest—mother.” The forced coyness in my voice made me want to throw up.

Washing quickly, I dressed in an old pair of dirty-blue

postman's pants, grey shirt, and a beat-up army windbreaker full of patches. I didn't bother with coffee, grabbed an orange from the refrigerator, went to the bedroom to say goodbye. Frances had such a peaceful look on her sleeping brown face, seemed a child herself.

It was 5.05 as I stood on the windy Riverside Drive corner, waiting for a bus. I started to eat the orange, then hurled it into the trees across the street. The whole damn world seemed unreal—a nightmare. But the bus came right on time, a brightly lit entity speeding through the dull-grey dawn.

I nodded at the driver, paid my fare, and sat down. For a moment I stared out the window at the dark Hudson River, wishing the bus would never stop—keep traveling forever. "Cut the goon-thinking," I told myself. "Think how you're going to meet the rent when Fran stops working. You'd better start working on finding an outside job."

I nearly smiled: I'd soon be a real post office hustler—the clerks and carriers who are half-ass lawyers on the side, or peddling insurance, mutual funds, real estate, even Christmas cards. All this sideline stuff didn't add up to any real, steady extra income. I needed an outside *job*. I could call Ted, but I hated the thought of returning to detective work, even the guard end, or battling dance hall drunks. Perhaps Kay might get me something in the TV world? Nuts: what part-time jobs were open there, especially to a brown skin? Hell, I couldn't afford to be choosy—I'd even pilot an elevator at night. . . . Fran and I liked lounging around the apartment in the evening, listening to jazz on our hi-fi, or going out to a foreign movie. . . . With the kid not even born yet, the damn responsibilities were already fencing in our lives! It was Friday—I had the weekend off, would look around for 'something.'

Leaving the bus, I joined a couple of other half-asleep carriers, all of us heading for the station like silent robots in the cold dawn. Soon as I took off my windbreaker, punched in, the foreman looked at his work sheet: a parcel postman

was off on comp time, so I was assigned to his truck for the day. It was better than wrestling with the magazines.

Working with a sub, I started sorting the packages and drops—both of us waiting for the other regular driver to bring the truck from the garage. It was a simple separation: we did the east side of the station area first—the west side in the afternoon. I noticed the sub looking at me oddly. Finally he asked loudly, “Touie, you hungover? You’re screwing up the separation, put the hospital mail in with the. . . .”

For the next few hours I worked hard—trying not to think—stacking the storage box bags for the carriers to pick up along their routes. By 9.30 we’d finished that, and we’re delivering parcel post—an easier job. The regular driver, a Jewish fellow named Murray, was limping a little. He asked, “Touie, I’m pooped—how about me knocking off for coffee first?”

“Sure. Hurt your leg?”

“Merely stiff. Playing basketball with my kid last night. I’m 44, too old to be keeping up with a 16-year-old.”

Hell, when my kid’s 16, I’ll be 56—an old creep, I thought. Going to have children, have them while you’re young and. . . .

Murray shook me. “I asked if you’re feeling okay, Touie. You look—tense.”

“So shut up and see what COD’s we have,” I snapped.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you. I have a headache. I’ll work the truck around the block, pick you up in front of the drugstore in about a half hour.”

At 10.30 I had coffee and a couple of rolls, felt a little better. I phoned Kay but she was out—probably hadn’t come in yet. I was relieved—hated asking her for a job. I said I’d call back around noon.

Then I phoned Ted Bailey. Hearing his rough voice was reassuring. I didn’t tell him Fran was pregnant, of course, merely that I wanted guard work.

“Toussiant, I don’t go in for that penny-ante crap no

more. We haven't taken a skip-tracing, special officer, or even a store security case, in months. But. . ."

"I'll try someplace else. Maybe you can recommend me to another agency."

"Take it easy, Toussiant: wasn't for you I wouldn't be on Madison Avenue. I haven't forgotten that. Wait a second, let me see my schedule. . . I have a luncheon appointment set for noon. . . How about coming here at one-thirty? We'll work out something."

"Ted, I'm not asking for a handout!"

"Because we haven't seen each other for almost a year, you must have forgotten old Ted: remember me—need to blast a dime loose from my mitts? No handouts. Come down and let's talk. I have irons going in a lot of fires. Can you make it this afternoon, Toussiant?"

"If I can't, I'll phone at noon," I told him, hanging up. The very thought of getting into detective work again, snooping around in the private garbage of other people's lives, made me feel crummy.

I called the post office, asked the timekeeper if I could get sub time after one, said I wasn't feeling well. "Sure thing, Touie. Thought you looked off your feed this morning. Saucing it up last night?"

I'd never been to Ted's new offices—felt out of place in my battered windbreaker and pants—dirtier than ever after working parcel post. The door merely read: THE TED BAILEY AGENCY . . . in modest letters, nothing about his being a private badge. There was a pert redheaded receptionist, streamlined as the contemporary office furniture, and a few modern prints on the walls. It could have been the offices of an ad agency, until you walked down a short hallway, passed a small machine shop where a young fellow—probably an engineer—was working on a pocket tape recorder. Ted had a fortune tied up in these electronic gadgets—the tools of the industrial spy.

Seeing old Ted didn't help my sad mood. Before, he'd looked like what he was: an honest old roughneck. Now, in

place of the badly-fitting blue serge suits, the stiff collars and stained ties, poor Ted was stuffed into a black Ivy League uniform: thin pants, a scrumpy, narrow-shouldered coat which even sported gold buttons, white tab shirt, wisp of a tie strangling his fat neck. Somehow his wild grey hair had skipped the crewcut. The poor bastard looked like a flunky.

Shaking my hand hard, Ted waved his free hand proudly around his office, a slick job in Swedish modern. "Toussiant! Don't make sense, we live a dozen subway stops from each other and . . . what's it been, 10 months, a year, since I laid eyes on you? Still look big and hard."

I glanced at his Italian casuals, fitting his big feet like slippers. "What they doing to you, Ted? I liked you better in the two-pants suits, the high cop's shoes."

Belching softly, Ted patted his obviously-girdled gut. "You have to fit the pattern—in the old days when I was doing mostly guard jobs, or shadowing husbands—I looked that type of dick. Now I'm an 'industrial investigator'—got to reflect the part. What's with you?"

"Only around because I'm standing up," I said, as Ted sat in the red leather swivel chair behind a sleek ebony desk and pointed for me to drop my dusty in a walnut and black leather deal which was far more comfortable than it looked. "I need a job—nights."

"Quit the P.O.?"

"Nope. But I need extra cash—the high cost-of-living jive." For some reason I couldn't bring myself to tell anybody Fran was 'with child.' Perhaps I didn't want to believe it myself.

Ted lit a fancy cigarette. He used to chew cold cigars. Pressing a desk button, he grinned. "It happens we have something for you. In fact, you're the ideal man for the job. My partner. . ."

"You have a partner now?"

Ted stuffed a pill into his mouth, tapping his belly as if praising it. "Yeah. She's coming in . . ."

The door opened, almost on cue, and I smelt the perfume

before Kay Robbins came rushing across the thick carpet, threw herself on my lap, gave me what she was sure was one hell of a kiss. Kay hadn't changed much: still pretty in an over-made-up way, the clothes horse in the very latest high style. She now wore her copper-colored hair in a sort of silly pony tail. Kissing me again, fingers feeling the muscles of my arms, Kay gushed, "Touie M. Moore—like old times! How's Fran?"

"Fine. Barbara?"

"Butch is just great. We called you several times but. . . ."

"I know. We phoned to ask you up to our place about a month ago, but you weren't in," I lied. Fran couldn't stand Kay's type—didn't want to be their 'pet Negro.' "You Ted's partner?"

Kay jumped to her feet, made as if drawing six guns. "Kay, the female eye! Only reason I don't wear my badge—hurts my titties."

I glanced at Ted, still patting his gut. He seemed bored. When I last knew him, Kay made him blush.

She sat on the edge of his desk, facing me, flashing thin white thighs. Lighting her tiny jeweled pipe—as if she still had to give me the full shock treatment—Kay said, "I'm a full partner, but on the silent side. I still grind out PR at Central TV, too. Like everything else, nine-tenths of this industrial work is contacts—my specialty. Ted does the actual work, I do the selling. Keep the partner bit quiet, Touie, Central might take a dim view of such things. Now—what's with this job pitch? I've always thought of you as one contented guy, the happy mailman."

"I am, but a . . . few . . . eh . . . expenses jumped up. Thought if I could work a couple of nights a week and. . . ."

"Tell him about the job, Kay." Ted cut in.

Kay's blue eyes smiled down at me as she shifted her legs, perhaps to prove she was wearing a lacy garter belt. "It's so exciting to be working together again, Touie. Horrible thing to say, but solving that TV murder . . . it was the highlight of my life. I . . ."

"If Toussiant's to leave tonight, tell him about the job" Ted cut in again, and damn if the old bastard didn't actually have a tone of 'executive impatience' in his rough voice.

"I'm leaving—for where?"

"Mexico City," Kay said, her face all one selling smile.

"You're nuts. I merely want a weekend job," I said, standing.

"Oh, sit down and listen to me, Touie," Kay said. "I'm not handing you any oil about thinking big—but the fact is, in our operation there aren't any small jobs. Why aim for a few bucks when you can make thousands? Listen: in this industrial espionage rat-race, we're using a new approach—going over the heads of management to reach the stockholder. I write up a swank presentation suggesting the stockholder impress upon management the need for our services to jack up profits. It's much like institutional advertising: may get some immediate results, or, having already softened the larger stockholders, it will help land future contracts. One of the concerns we've been stalking is a large chemical company manufacturing industrial solvents. The majority stockholder is a Mrs. Grace Lupe-Varon of Mexico City, stepdaughter of the company's founder—real money-bag. I sent her the usual presentation and yesterday we received an airmail—a short note asking us to send her a 'competent private detective, but who must not look like a dick . . .'"

"To do what?" I asked.

Kay blew a smoke ring at me—the tobacco had a spicy smell. "Naturally, we immediately long-distanced the old lady, explained it would cost a \$100 per day, plus expenses, asked what the case was about. She was quite abrupt over the phone, merely ordered us to send a man down at once. Ordinarily we wouldn't bother with her petty troubles—but pleasing this biddy can be the key to a really big contract. Touie, take the case and *all* the fee is yours, and a percentage of whatever we may make from the chemical outfit. Your plane leaves Kennedy at 9.50 p.m., we've already made out your credentials—securing a tourist permit takes minutes."

"Kay, you smoking tea in that pipe? I haven't done any detective work in over three years and . . . Mexico—I don't even speak the language!"

Ted said, "I don't know what the old bag wants, but certainly *not* a Mexican private badge. Working the expense account right, after a week or two, you'll return with two grand, at least. Remember, the coin is solid—she's loaded. I never thought of you until you phoned, but you're the ideal man—being colored, who'd take you for a dick?"

"She might be less than enchanted with a colored detective," I said, angry at Ted for bringing it up.

"Oh, no, none of that nonsense," Kay said sharply. "We're sending her our best man, as per her request. You know me, Touie, I don't stand for any of that slop. Besides, this is Mexico—remember?"

"Also, remember, I'll have absolutely no standing in a foreign country. What can she need a private badge for?" I asked, confused. Being a junior regular in the station I didn't get a summer vacation, but had a couple of weeks coming up. Fran and I had been thinking of driving out to see her folks, perhaps even my mother in California. If I could have my vacation time moved up—two grand would be a mighty soft cushion for us.

Ted reassured me. "Sounds like a crank. Can't be anything criminal, or she'd have gone to the Mexican police. Want you to tail her husband, find his mistress, her lost cat. . . . She's probably used a Mexican private dick without results—maybe hubby knows 'em all. Suddenly she gets this letter from us, which gives her a wild idea and . . . you know these wealthy nuts."

Kay took her turn at bat. "Touie, the chance of landing the chemical account is so important—we'll guarantee you a thousand a week—if you don't shake that much from her. You should be able to stretch it out to 2 weeks. If we cut you in for . . . say, 10 per cent of any future work we secure from the chemical concern—that could add up to three or

five thousand—in time. Touie, this is Mexico City, consider it a vacation—take Fran along.”

“She’s pregnant,” I said without thinking.

Kay did a double-take, copper ponytail dancing, blue eyes popping. “Touie, oh, my—no? What did she do that for?”

“It just happened.” The fact I was in agreement with a wack like Kay disturbed me. “That’s why I’m here. We’re making a decent double salary, but when Fran stops working—our rent is \$135 a month and my take-home pay under \$75 a week, at the moment. It’s that simple.”

Ted took five \$100 bills from his desk drawer, laid them out as if placing cheese before a rat. “She sent this retainer. We’ve already bought your plane tickets—tossing them in for free—and we’ll advance you as much of the two grand guarantee as you need. I think being a mailman is proof of U.S. citizenship, you dash right over to Mexican Consulate—it’s on 41st Street—get your tourist card in a second.”

“I’m not sure I’m. . .”

“Come on, daddy, you’re doing it all for the kid—or the twins,” Kay began. “A . . .”

“Twins? Bite your tongue!”

Kay blew a kiss at me. “If we land the big account, your cut will put the kid through college. I insist upon being the godmother. Easiest kind of mother to be.”

“It’s all—crazy. I do have a vacation coming up soon, but I doubt if I can get it moved up now—tonight,” I mumbled.

Kay reached for the phone. “Central TV ought to carry a little weight—let me see what I can do. What’s the name of the station where you work, Touie, your badge number?”

I heard my big mouth giving her the info like a pet parakeet. All the time, under the words, I felt uneasy as hell about something else—what would Fran say? Tells me she’s going to have a baby, in the morning, and by evening I’m on my way to Mexico? Unless I did a good job—and what work could I do in Mexico?—I really would be accepting a handout. True, even if I botched the deal, being on vacation I wouldn’t be losing any p.o. pay. . . . have to return with

some part of the 500 buck retainer, no matter what happened. But that wasn't giving Ted and Kay a fair deal.

Glancing at Ted busy swallowing some Tums, I said, "You're taking a big chance. I'll be a total stranger in Mexico and if I louse up the case—goodbye any chemical contract."

"Stop running yourself down, Toussiant, you're a damn good detective. I haven't forgotten if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be sitting here. Quit carrying the mail: I'll make you a partner right this second."

"I don't want to exchange my p.o. badge for any private tin-start stepping in other people's dirt. While we're crying on each other's shoulder, Ted, I haven't forgotten you helped me shake a murder rap."

"Except for the fact we've been expanding and are flat now, money-wise," Ted said, "I'd have loaned you a couple grand myself, when you phoned. Touie, you're doing me a favor by taking this job. It's because you were—are—a great investigator, I'm offering you the job. If we get the chemical work, we'll be the biggest outfit on the avenue—maybe you'll be willing to chuck the post office then."

"Stop it, Ted, you'll be thanking me for your ulcer next," I said, amazed at a guy getting struck by ambition so late in life.

Kay made exactly two calls and by 2.30 p.m. everything was set. I had two weeks' vacation starting Monday—I confirmed this by phoning my own station boss, who was impressed with the VIP treatment I'd received from the post office higher-ups. I had my Aeronaves round-trip tickets, the \$500, plus a \$500 advance check from Ted. We had agreed it would be more business-like for Mrs. Lupe-Varon to be billed by the agency instead of me holding out my hand.

Kay taxied over with me while I paid \$3 for a Mexican tourist card, good for 180 days. Kay was her usual bundle of nervous chatter, filling me in on the latest gossip of the television world—which I couldn't care less about. At twenty to three I followed her into a bank near the offices of Central Televising—to cash the \$500 check.

Oddly enough, Kay and I hadn't drawn many 'looks' on the street or in the cab. In my windbreaker and dirty pants it was assumed I was a porter, or something, working for her. Inside the bank I stood at the railing separating the bank executives' desks from the common folk, while Kay cashed the check on one of Central's accounts. The ass't manager, a plump man in his late thirties, was all courtesy: Central was probably the bank's largest depositor. Kay motioned for me to come over, introduced me as I endorsed the check. "Are you an actor, Mr. Moore?" the lardy manager asked, with patronizing politeness.

"Hard to say what I am," I mumbled.

Kay said brightly, "Mr. Moore is a very important man at Central, very, very big behind the scenes—*very big*." I knew she was getting in her 'kicks,' laying it on because I was a Negro.

Soon I had five more \$100 bills and as we walked outside, Kay said, "I have to run back to my Central desk—becoming a true split personality kid. Touie, soon as you find a hotel in Mexico, wire us your address. Luck-dear."

Kay reached up to peck my cheek, causing severe neck wrenching among the passing crowd. Watching her walk into the entrance of the Central building, I headed for the subway—then returned to the bank to change one of the \$100 bills. There were lines in front of all the tellers' windows. I made for the rear of the bank and the shortest line.

The bank was using two uniformed guards, big soggy retired cop types. No sooner was I on line than the guard nearest me actually came running over, stopped about a foot from me, hand near his holster. He glared at me with hard, emotionless eyes. It took me a dizzy moment to get the picture: obviously this clown hadn't seen me talking to the boot-licking ass't manager before. . . . Corny as it may sound, the fool thought I was about to stick-up the bank because I was roughly dressed—and mostly because of my dark skin! No matter where you are, always find some side pocket of

hate, never tell from what cockeyed angle bigotry will come. There was no mistaking why he was standing on top of *me*.

The doubts and aggravation coiling my insides all day suddenly burst. As my turn at the grill separating me from the young, pale-faced, lady teller came—I reached into my pocket for one of the \$100 bills. The guard moved so close I smelt his stale breath. Wheeling on him, I asked, “Exactly why the hell are you breathing down my neck?” I guess I was talking loudly: the others in the bank—all white faces—turned to stare at us.

“You have an account here?” store cop asked.

“That’s none of your goddamn business—don’t see you asking anybody else that!”

“No trouble now, you. . . .”

I should have let him finish the sentence, call me a ‘black bastard,’ then I could have sued the bank for a bundle. Instead, I cut him off with: “Get out of my face or there will be trouble!”

He moved his right hand, trying to grab my elbow—I think. Kicking his ankle, I dropped him with a left hook deep in his jelly gut. The guard hit the floor with a small thud—terribly loud in the sudden silence about us. Immediately, there were new sounds—of running feet; the second guard coming at me. I didn’t even look up, merely stood there, careful to keep my hands open and at my sides. I’d made a rock play—one little wrong move now and I could be shot, jailed, beaten, or. . . .

I was lucky; the ass’t manager won the race. He panted, “Why, Mr. Moore, what’s wrong?” Then he added, loudly, “Everybody please remain in line—we’re closing in a moment, at three, Kindly keep your lines.”

Lardy sure didn’t have any fat on his brains. As the other guard came lumbering up, hand on holster, the ass’t manager smilingly shoved the guard’s heavy hand from the gun, said smoothly, “Pete, help Charley. He fell and banged his head. Warned Charley those new shoes of his looked slippery.”

Pete pulled Charley to his feet. Charley had both hands pressed to his gut, still fighting for breath. As the old saying goes—if looks were knives I'd have been bleeding to death.

The ass't manager was very good. In a joking tone he said, "Pete, take Charley inside and get him a drink—of water." Then, like an m.c. he beamed at one and all. "Come on folks, nothing to stare at—we all slip now and then. Closing soon, kindly get in line." Turning to me, he whispered calmly, "Now, what happened, Mr. Moore?"

I fully know how lucky I was—in his eyes I wasn't a Negro, but 'very big' at Central TV. "I was waiting to change a \$100 bill, but your guard assumed any 'burly' Negro must be a . . ."

"Why didn't you come to my desk, Mr. Moore? I would have been glad to have changed it for you."

"I can stand in line, change it myself!" I snapped. Over his head I saw *the* manager suddenly walk—quickly—from his desk to the revolving door. Outside, two cops were leaving a squad car, guns in hand. The manager greeted them with a big smile, as if they were all frat brothers: the cops holstered their guns, fast.

"How do you want the money, sir?" a woman's voice asked. I looked around to see the teller talking: my dumb play hadn't disturbed her in the least.

"Tens, please." I pushed the bill to her. I didn't bother counting the change as the manager walked me to the door, making light and loud small talk—all of us buddy-buddy. I was angry at myself, I felt embarrassed before all the white faces watching me. If anybody had snickered, I would have belted them.

Cooling off on the subway ride uptown, I tried to rationalize—after all, I *was* roughly dressed. Yet I damn well knew plenty of white truckdrivers and freight handlers came in the bank and were never treated this way—*any* Negro was suspect. Still, I could have kept my trap shut, taken my change, and walked out. When you boiled it down: I'd nearly got killed over nothing. "The devil with it," I told myself. "It's

over. Main thing is, I have a grand on me, a chance to make another—if I can explain it to Fran. Still, what's there to explain, I got me a little job, with big pay? Really doing Ted and Kay a favor, too, all this transplanted biddy will want is for me to keep an eye on her errant son, or tail her wandering hubby. Man, I'm really crying with my mouth full of bread."

Fran and I had a three-room Riverside Drive apartment in the nineties—an interracial house: all of the original white tenants hadn't been able to flee, yet. Of course it was nice to be out of Harlem, although they had—legally—doubled the rent on the apartment. We'd used up the dough I'd had to furnish the place, and it was really comfortable. The one time Frances' jerky brother had come to New York from Ohio, he'd been impressed at being able to sit in our room and watch the lights of the ships on the Hudson, planes flying over New Jersey.

Three rooms—the kid could sleep in our room for a year or so, then it would mean having the living room double as a bedroom—I hated the idea. All my life I've slept in bedrooms which were living rooms, offices, or even kitchens—during the day; except now, and when I was in the army.

It was about 4 p.m. when I unlocked the front door, gazed at our contemporary furniture—which was never meant for a playground. Packing a light bag, I showered, shaved—had an hour to kill before Fran was due home.

Driving relaxes me. Taking the bag to the garage a few blocks away, I soon was wheeling up the Westside Drive in my old red Jaguar. But the good feeling didn't come—I kept thinking: now we won't be able to afford a garage, have to junk the Jag. With all the wild kids in the neighborhood the car wouldn't last long parked on the street, *if* I could find space. Damn: the one thing me and the world didn't need—one more brat!

Turning off at Riverdale, I headed back downtown. Frances was a secretary to a nice white lawyer—Kay had found her the job. Fran's take-home pay was higher than

mine. The lawyer's offices were on East 55th Street and the traffic was awful. I managed to circle the block twice, was telling myself I was a sap for not phoning first . . . when I suddenly saw Fran's tall brown frame in the crowd, the firm, long-legged way she walked. Would the kid spoil her figure? I wondered, honking the horn, calling her name. Happily, the low-slung red Jag stood out in the stream of cars and a moment later Fran was dashing over, wonderful warm smile on her dark face. Sliding into the bucket seat beside me, she followed a hot kiss with: "Well, well, aren't you the thoughtful Poppa!"

"You're not kidding, being a daddy is all I've been thinking about."

"Touie, I feel so . . . soo . . . *good*! I couldn't be any happier if I'd won the sweepstakes, or the . . . Nobel Prize! Isn't that silly?"

"Fran, the doc was absolutely certain you're pregnant?"

She turned to give me an odd look, lush lips making a thick red line. "Of course, this isn't anything you decide by tossing a coin. That was the first thing you said this morning, when I broke the good news. Almost seemed. . . . What are you dressed up for?"

"Thought we'd eat out," I said, driving toward the 59th Street bridge. "There's interesting restaurants at Kennedy airport."

"Touie, darling, it's at least 8 months before the baby is due; don't start pampering me—although I love it. We can't afford eating out—now."

I couldn't ask for a better cue to tell her about the job in Mexico. Fran sat there, as if frozen, while I talked, and we crawled along in the Long Island-bound traffic. When I finished, neither of us said a word for a time. Finally I told her, "Fran, honey, it's simple addition—our rent, phone, gas and electric, comes to about \$155 a month, more than double my weekly pay—I called Ted, figuring I might get some weekend guard work, but he says I'm just the man he needs for this job. I'll certainly return with at least a grand, plus

my percentage of whatever chemical business this may lead to. It will carry us over—for a time.”

She still didn't say a word, merely stared straight ahead with solemn big eyes. When she began weeping I turned off the parkway onto the grass, stopped the Jag. Rubbing her knee, I asked, “Aw, hon, why the tears? I'm going to make a wad and . . .”

She pushed my hand from her knee. I grabbed her thigh under her skirt, held it tightly, turned her head toward me with my other hand. “Come on, Frances, what is it? Ever since this morning you've been acting as if . . . it didn't exist.”

“You don't want the baby, do you?”

I stroked her ear. “I don't know. It . . . raises so many new problems. Money and . . .”

“Other couples have kids without any traumatic problems, Touie. I won't be able to work for a few months, but my folks will tide us over—if necessary. When the baby is old enough, we'll get a woman to take care of him and I'll return to work. . . .”

“Sure, let him be dragged up, with you working to pay for the maid! I . . . Fran, you're the one raising problems. I have an opportunity to make a grand and you start bawling. I'll be gone two weeks, probably less. In fact, you can come along if. . . .”

“Touie, *are* you coming back?”

Letting go of her, I couldn't have felt worse if I'd been worked-over. “My God, Fran, is *that* what you think—I'm taking a powder?”

She ran her hand over her forehead. “I . . . I don't really know. Yes, I suppose that's exactly what I am thinking.”

“Honey, you and I, we're the whole scene—far as I'm concerned! You *must* know that! Okay, perhaps I am jealous of the kid, of his disrupting our way of living . . . maybe I'm even afraid. This isn't the best world to bring a colored—or any—kid into, but. . . .”

“He'll make out okay, he'll be *our* child!”

“I hope so.” I wanted to tell Fran every dumb, knocked-

up, chippy believes the same pitch: *my* kid will be different. "I don't know how you could ever think I'd leave you. I could no more do that than . . . kill myself or. . ."

Fran slipped into my arms. "Touie, forgive me, I didn't mean it that way. This is such a big thing . . . I was bubbling over and . . . You didn't react, so this lousy little doubt got turned on in my mind. Darling, more than anything else in life, I want to make you a baby!"

Hugging Fran as we kissed fiercely—I was on the brink of tears myself . . . but all the time I wished her pregnancy was a false alarm. She whispered in my ear, "Touie, the world is in ferment; colored folks are at last coming into their own. You'll see, it will be a fine world our boy grows up in."

"Or our girl," I said, trying to make my voice gay. A great old bitchy goddamn world where a bank guard could have shot me dead. . . .!

"This job—any chance you'll be hurt? You'll be so far from me."

"Naw, it's a snap, some dizzy biddy with nothing on her mind. I thought we'd have a leisurely supper now, then you drive the Jag home. Seriously, Fran, how about coming down with me? We've always talked of traveling and Mexico City should be exciting."

"Touie, I can't just pack my job in. Besides, they say the water in Mexico—I couldn't chance getting sick."

"Yeah. Let's pull off this grass before a cop comes." Fran was right, but I really wanted her with me—damn kid was spoiling everything for us. "Honey, certain you'll be okay, alone for these few days?"

"Of course."

I thought she said it too fast, as if she wanted to be rid of me.

We ate East Indian food at the airport and gassed about Paris—which we'd never see, now. Although Frances did seem her usual jolly self, and I left \$500 with her to bank, I somehow felt this coldness between us—this tiny wall spelled b-a-b-y. Waiting at the boarding gate for my plane, I gave

her a last kiss. "Hon, think about flying down for the second week. I'll see about living conditions—phone you tomorrow, give you my address. Meantime, ask your boss about. . . ."

"We'll see."

I gave Fran a last kiss again as the gate opened. "Hon, take care of . . . of the two of you." The lightness in my voice was badly forced.

"We'll be just fine. You be careful, Touie."

Walking up the steps to the jet, I turned to wave at Fran, then the stewardess showed me my seat. Flying isn't my favorite means of travel—I'd done too much of it during the war. But once we were airborne, I began to unwind.

The terrible part was: I wasn't sure if I was running away or not.

Chapter 2

.

I HADN'T BEEN out of the country since Korea and the lights of the Mexico City airport gave me a charge. It was the middle of a very cold night and, despite having slept through most of the smooth flight from New York, Mexico City's high altitude hit me like a sleep pill the moment they opened the plane door.

When awake on the jet I had been full of the excited feeling being on the go gives me—traveling outside the USA is always kicks for a dark-skinned person. Then I'd think of Fran, missing her already, and become depressed. As she'd said, thousands of couples had kids every hour without any soul searching. . . . But, as the tone of Kay's words had implied, having a child was such a nuisance—Damn, shouldn't think of my kid as a pest—surely give him a headstart in our neurotic sweepstakes.

My muddled thinking was salted with a few other wild-hair thoughts: the stupid case I was on—not even having the smallest idea what I was flying into, what was expected of me. . . .

My Burberry spring coat didn't keep out much of the night cold and I was glad it only took me a moment to go through customs, then I stepped into the first taxi. The driver asked me something in Spanish and when I said I didn't speak the lingo, repeated, "Hotel? Hotel?" he held up a swarthy hand and nodded. He didn't look any lighter or darker than a lot of cats you see in the Red Rooster, or Dante's, back in New York.

He drove fast and at night Mexico City merely looked old—nothing special. He let me off in front of a ritzy hotel,

obviously a big tourist deal. A bellhop in a snappy uniform took my bag and after I paid the cabbie, I tipped the astonished bellhop, and started walking, glad my bag was light. Although the middle of the night is hardly the time for hotel shopping I kept going along the deserted streets until I came to a third-rate hotel called The Prince Montio. The Prince was a trifle tacky, if clean-looking, its ancient lobby neat and dull. A porter dropped his mop to double as a desk clerk.

The hotel was on a street called Balderas, which, according to the map the plane hostess had given me, was in the heart of the city, near the two main drags, Avenida Juarez and Reforma. I registered for the cheapest room and bath, fell off into a deep sleep the second I hit the bed.

I awoke at 9 a.m., feeling rested, the room stuffy—it was hot and sunny outside. Mexico City reminded me of Oran during the war: shiver all night and sweat all day. I stretched on the bed, wishing Fran was next to me. After a fast bath I quickly unpacked, placing my few shirts and things in the top dresser drawer—a hunk of furniture 3rd Avenue antique dealers would fight over. I'd been in such a hurry to pack, I'd taken a torn red T-shirt by mistake. I shoved this out of sight under my shirts, put my brush and shaving stuff on top of the dresser, made a mental note to buy toothpaste, and then went downstairs.

The lobby of the Prince Montio looked different by day—like the waiting room of an undertaker's parlor. The day desk clerk was a skinny baldy in a dress suit, the white collar frayed, his skin a waxen, chalk-white. He had the fixed, impersonal air of all desk clerks. Speaking better English than I did, he told me breakfast could be had in the dining room, and was I interested in a tourist guide for the day? When I said I wasn't interested, he didn't press it. I wired Ted my hotel address, then had the clerk put through a long distance call to Frances. She wasn't home—which puzzled me: where could she be at 10 a.m. on a Saturday? Maybe shopping, but on her off days Fran was a late sleeper. I wired her my

address, then asked the clerk to phone Mrs. Grace Lupe-Varon. After flinging a lot of Spanish into the phone, he put his dainty pale hand over the receiver, told me, "Senora Lupe-Varon is teaching at the University this morning. I am speaking to her maid, who says you are expected at the house at one o'clock. What shall I tell her, Mr. Moore?"

"I'll be there."

When he hung up, he gave me a tight smile, showing cheap false teeth, then said, "If this is your first trip to our country, I trust you are aware of the usual tourist precautions—be careful of what you eat and drink. Bottled beverages are fine. Of course, in our dining room, as in any of the first-class restaurants, one need never worry about either the food or the water. I myself believe there is nothing wrong with our water, rather most North American tourists eat too much and too fast. I . . ."

"Thanks, I'll be careful. Matter of fact, I'm starved," I said, heading for the dining room. Somehow I was astonished at my client being a university teacher—it didn't exactly fit the old biddy picture I had in my mind.

The dining room was a study in dull white: a dozen tables with white cloths, bare white walls, and two white-coated elderly pale waiters. In all this whiteness there was only one person eating—and he was colored. A stocky man of about 55, lighter than me, with a lot of grey in his short hard hair. Wearing a natty, plaid sport jacket, dark slacks, and a white knit shirt—there was no doubting he was an American.

For a moment he looked up from his coffee, startled at seeing my dark puss—perhaps I was reacting the same way; then his wide face lit up with a warm smile, shrewd eyes seemed to be laughing. He waved at me and I nodded back, grinning myself. A waiter asked, "You wish to sit with your friend, Senor?"

"Well. . ."

"Certainly, sit with me." His voice was deep and mellow; he rattled off something in fast Spanish and the waiter brought me over to his table.

"My name is Frank," he said, holding out his hand. "Quite a thing, seeing another club-member suddenly appear. Almost felt I was in the Hotel Theresa, for a moment."

"I'm Toussiant Moore," I said, shaking his hand.

"An illustrious name indeed, sir. Of Haitian descent?"

"Not that I know of. Middle name is Marcus—after Marcus Garvey—which ought to tell you my dad was an old-time nationalist from the islands." I nodded at the waiter. "Coffee, lots of toast, a couple of poached eggs."

The waiter understood it all, except for the poached part. My new buddy explained it in his good Spanish and when the waiter left us, I said, "From the way you talk the lingo, Mr. Frank, you've been in Mexico a long time."

"Frank Smith, sir, a good old and simple handle," he said, studying me, my clothes—evidently amused by what he saw. His face was kind of bumpy over the eyes—might have been scar tissue. "I travel around a lot, learned Spanish years ago. You arrived last night?"

"Yeah. My first trip to Mexico."

"I envy you, there's much to see and enjoy here. This hotel is off the tourist beat. A most comfortable place, and close to embassy row, but the management has absolutely no sense of public relations, advertising. But a coincidence, isn't it, a couple of home boys in the same unknown hotel?"

"I stumbled on this—walked around until I found a place which didn't look like a tourist trap."

"Tourist?"

"Yes." I hesitated as I said it. I felt so little like a detective, it was almost true.

"Traveling alone, Mr. Moore?"

"Yeah."

"Expect to stay in Mexico City long?"

"Depends on how well I like it, and *vice versa*," I said, wondering why the cross-examination. The waiter brought my breakfast and for a few minutes Mr. Smith toyed with his coffee, let me eat in peace. Then he started again. "My man,

I detect a New York slur to your words. Are you in business in the Big Apple?"

"You've sharp ears. I left Idlewild last night. I'm a mail-man," I added, over a mouthful of eggs.

Smith raised his bushy grey eyebrows in mock astonishment. "Must be paying more than I remember. How come you picked Mexico City for a vacation, instead of—say—Canada?"

"Say I like a warm climate," I told him, annoyed at his prying.

Smith sipped his coffee, motioned for the waiter to bring a hot cup. I ordered more toast and orange juice—with Smith's help. Then he said, "You look so burly, plus the busted nose—I'd have taken you for a cop."

"That's happened to me before. What do you do, Frank?"

"Many things, but basically—I'm a writer, a creative person," he said, laying it on so heavily I started to raise my feet off the floor.

"You're quite a ways from 8th Street yourself," I said, thinking I hardly had to come all the way to Mexico City to hear this kind of corn, not to mention the 'my man' jive, which sounded like an old record.

"The Village is a sham now. I knew it, slightly, when it truly was a haven for intellectuals. Toussiant Moore—haven't I heard your name before?"

I shook my head. "I'm a nobody. Writer—you a reporter?"

"No, not in the newspaper sense. As I told you, I am a creative person. I've been working on a novel for the past years. My wife died and her insurance enables me to wander about, writing, studying life."

I nodded. Smith was obviously a lonely snow artist with the need to impress anybody who'd listen to him. He looked like a retired civil service character.

"I can't seem to write here, too much distraction, so I'm leaving today. Otherwise I'd show you around the city."

"That's okay, I have to look up somebody. . . ."

"You have friends here?"

"Sort of—friends of friends," I told the nosy jerk, lighting my pipe. Smith started a thin, dark cigar working. Sniffing at my smoke, he asked, "You burning perfume, Toussiant?"

"Only to counteract the stink of your rope," I said, wondering why he was digging me. "Where are you heading, back to the States?"

"Yes, taking the L.A. plane." Pulling out an old and flat wallet, he motioned for the waiter. "Be my guest, brother Moore?"

"Come on—thanks, but no. I'll sign for my meal," I told the waiter, who handed me a pencil and the bill.

Smith gave me a sly grin. "I see you're an experienced traveler, keeping a record of what the trip costs. Remaining in Mexico City, or are you on tour?"

"I like to stay in one spot, get to really know a city." As we walked into the lobby, I added, "How's things here?"

Being a Negro he knew exactly what I meant. "So-so. There's a kind of color caste system—the pure white descendants of the original Spanish invaders lording it over those with Indian blood. Of course the Spanish were part-Moor before they ever heard of Mexico, had more than a touch of the tar brush. No outright J.C. stuff, mostly it's a peso barrier: in short, few Indians, or the *Mestizos*, have the dough to go to the better places. Far as we go, they're straight—ironically we're lumped with the ofay tourists, considered part of the hated *gringos*. But as a tourist, you'll have nothing to worry about. If you go to Acapulco, you'll find darker skins—the pirates once tried importing some of our African ancestors as slaves, but it never worked out." Smith suddenly pumped my hand. "Sorry our meeting must be so brief, Toussiant."

"Have you been here long?"

Smith almost laughed in my face, as though I'd made some kind of inside joke. "A few weeks. As I told you—I bounce around until I find a spot where my creative juices

start flowing. Take it easy on the water, and spicy foods."

He waved and walked toward the elevator. I had this windbag pegged: there's a certain type of Negro clown who considers it a sin to talk to another colored person should they meet in the outside white world. Of course I didn't let Smith bug me. Also, in this case it could have nothing to do with color—USA tourists avoid others from the States like the plague.

I strolled around Mexico City, feeling great. Crazy times: one day I'm sweating in a mail truck and full of worry—24 hours later I was walking a foreign city with money in my pockets. Passing the *zocalo*, or public square, with the great cathedral on one side, then the markets a few blocks away . . . I was reminded of Italy. Walking through the *Alameda*, a well-kept park, I wished Fran was with me, enjoying the cool air and the sights. I started worrying again over her not being home when I phoned.

The city was full of bull-fight posters—they were having a shindig the next day, Sunday, and I decided to see it if I could. Around noon I passed the Wells Fargo—American Express office full of tourists acting like they'd found an oasis—a home away from home. I dropped in, tried calling Fran. Still no answer. I wondered if she'd run home to Mama in Bingston, Ohio.

I was hungry again and went into a small restaurant for some real Mexican food. I explained this to the beaming, tan-faced waiter, who told me in excited and bad English, "*Si*, sir, senior, I understand! You see, I bring *just* what you want eat!"

Ten minutes later the silly sonofabitch brought me an order of fried chicken, seemed on the verge of tears when I looked at it doubtfully. I ate it, with a bottle of beer, but told him, "If you bring me a slice of watermelon for dessert, I'll shove it down your throat!"

"*Si*, *si*, I glad you like food. I read much Yankee magazines, know what *you* want."

Even this olive-skinned idiot couldn't spoil my good

mood—I laughed and he laughed; Fools Incorporated. I wanted to return to the hotel for some shut-eye, felt as if I'd never gone to bed, but I showed a taxi driver the address of Mrs. Lupe-Varon's estate. He nodded violently and opened the door. I got in and promptly came wide awake.

All foreign hackies seem to be frustrated pilots, but this toothless wonder drove as if his heap was the only one on the streets. When I gasped for him to slow down, he thought I was asking for more speed. Clamping my big mouth shut, I gazed up at the mountains which surround the valley that is Mexico City . . . tried to forget my fear. The estate was on the outskirts of the city and after a few minutes of furious driving, we turned into a modest driveway—on two wheels, of course—sending me crashing against the side of the old cab. When he braked to a sudden stop, I tasted the fried chicken all over again. Turning, the driver gave me a proud smile—his thin face working its way down to a lantern jaw. I felt like tipping him with a belt on that inviting chin. But why complain—I was alive.

The 'estate' was a modern ranch-type bungalow of about five rooms in pastel pink, with a small amount of neat lawn. It could be the old gal wasn't as loaded as Ted thought, might even be teaching for eating money. I worked a brass knocker in the shape of a bull's horn on the wooden door, curious as to her reaction on seeing she'd hired a brown skin. Solve things nicely—for me—if she tossed me off the case and I flew home to Fran. . . .

The door opened too soon, as if somebody had been waiting on the other side. 'Somebody' was a highschool gal, slim in tight orange pants with belt of large silver coins, white boat-neck blouse with more silver gadgets—sharp face burnt a leathery tan in contrast to the mannishly-cut, bleached-sandy hair. She wore no make-up, even the toe-nails of her bare feet unpainted. Holding out a slim hand, she asked, "Mr. Moore?" It wasn't a highschoolish voice.

Shaking the tiny, cool hand, I nearly made the classical *faux pas* of asking, "Is your mother home?" before she

smiled and said, "I'm Grace Lupe-Varon. Please come in."

I tried not to look amazed. Her watery-blue eyes were cool, intelligent peepers, and it was only when she smiled I noticed the faint wrinkles around the corners of her eyes and thin mouth—realized she had to be about 30. "You're not what I expected, Mrs. Lupe-Varon."

"No? What did you expect?" she asked as I followed her into a low-ceilinged, beamed room. The room looked bare—plain furniture of a rich, dark wood, no carpets, one Rivera print on a side wall, faded Indian wall rug on another. Although it was hot outside and the room warm—I found myself shivering a little.

"Sort of an old spinster, for some reason," I said, wondering why I was running my flabby mouth so much.

She sat on a couch while I dropped it on a hard chair. Now she was openly studying me; sitting with legs folded under her well-shaped can. The rest of her was nothing—flat-chested, with a face 'cute' rather than pretty. I even decided she might be older than me. She reminded me of Kay: a blue-eyed babe with looks and too much drive. Offering me a cigarette, I took out my pipe, and the both of us shared my match. After a few puffs, in this hard, almost-brittle voice, she said, "You're better than I expected. As I explained over the phone, you're being a Negro fits in perfectly for the job."

"Exactly what is the job?" I asked. Kay and her damn phony talk about they'll take me or lump it—all the time she'd checked first to see if it was okay. Whites!

"Of course, you must be wondering why I've brought you all the way to Mexico City, Mr. Moore. Why I don't go to our police."

"I'm not paid to wonder, Mrs. Varon—Lupe-Varon."

"Be easier if you call me Grace. I'll enjoy saying Toussiant—such a lovely name. Odd, too. Soon as I heard it I recalled the TV murder case you solved. Mexican papers carry the world's sensational crime cases. I sent for you because my husband. . . ."

"Mrs. . . . Grace, it isn't so much *why* you sent for me," I cut in, trembling again—there seemed to be a sense of evil in the house, trite as that may sound. I shivered even though I was relieved. Tailing a two-timing husband would be messy but simple. ". . . But rather what you think I can *do* here. I've no legal standing in Mexico, and what's far more important in detective work—no contacts, quick ways of securing information. As the agency told you, I don't even speak the language." I wanted to make certain she didn't expect any over-night success—I was determined to stretch the \$100 per day to the full two weeks.

"I know all that," she said coldly, eyes staring boldly at mine. "I'm neither rushed for time, nor money. I fully realize you'll have to start from scratch, so to speak. Which is the very reason I wanted an investigator from the States—for neither will you be bothered by the national prejudices here."

She lost me in this maze of words. "Prejudices . . . ? What is it you want me to do about your husband?"

"Find his murderer," she said, brittle voice so harsh it beat me over the head.

Chapter 3

.

"YOUR HUSBAND . . . MURDERED?" I mumbled, rolling with the punch, feeling a real chill now at the thought I'd come on a fool's errand. "Grace, murder is a job for the police, not for any private badge. For a private operator to find the answer to murder in the States would be difficult, in a strange country . . ."

She held up a slim finger as if quieting a backward boy. "I'm sure you're right, but suppose in the States I accused, or rather hinted, that some national sport hero—a Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, for instance—was guilty of murder? It isn't that the police would be inefficient in handling so grave a charge . . . but merely on my suspicions, lacking any actual proof. . . . Well, no one wishes to accuse a public hero."

I shook my head. "Let's take it from the top again—who's this big hero?"

"Jose Miguel Cuzo." She said it slowly as if the name should mean something to me. It did ring a dim bell in my dizzy head. Then Grace added, "Every Mexican knows him as *El Indio*, the Indian sensation of the bull rings, said to be the greatest matador ever."

"I saw his name on the posters—he's fighting tomorrow."

"While I haven't any proof—that's your job—I *know* he killed my husband!"

"I see," I said, as if I knew what I was talking about. "This can take a lot of time."

"I told you, time—the expense—doesn't matter. I hardly expect any denouement overnight. By that I mean. . . ."

"I know what the word means," I cut in. She had all the

time in the world, but I had to be back delivering mail in 15 days. I shivered as a drop of cold sweat sped down my side. I was getting in way over my head.

Grace suddenly smiled—a kind of yawn. The teeth—yellowish around the edges—showing her age. “Let’s have coffee while I fill you in on the details. It will relax us both. I usually have my *siesta* now. In the States they make fun of *manana*, but they could use some—it makes for less tension and a longer life.” She clapped her hands smartly and a fat, barefooted woman in a plain white lumpy dress brought in a tray with a pitcher and two thin demitasse cups. The woman wore her iron-grey hair in a long braid; the cream-colored flat face and high cheek bones said she was Indian. The sight of her made me unwind—a little—as if suddenly recognizing my surroundings—with the maid always being ‘colored.’

The thick coffee was bitter and when the Indian woman left, Grace lit another cigarette, said, “*El Indio* was an unknown matador three years ago. Now he . . . Have you ever seen a bull fight?”

“No.”

“Like any blood sacrifice, it’s full of certain rituals and traditions. I’m far from an *aficionado*: in truth I hate the whole bloody act. Actually, the real purpose of the . . . eh . . . rituals, the *picadors*, *banderillas*, the various cape movements, is to tire and weaken the poor beast, who, in reality, never has a chance. Jose became an overnight sensation by doing away with the horses, the *picadors*, the others. In essence he puts on a one-man show, has speeded up the ancient ‘sport.’ Without first tiring the bull—bleeding him—learning and correcting any defects in the animal’s eyesight, determining from which side the bull will hook, how he will charge . . . various other technical aspects with which I won’t bore you . . . *El Indio* places a single *banderilla*, then calls for the sword and after a few minutes of close and daring cape work—makes the kill. A young and handsome animal himself, he has captured the fancy of the fans and tourists. The

poorer the country the more of an escape a sport becomes: hence, the greater its importance. In short, Cuzo has become the . . . the Babe Ruth of the Mexican bull rings. The people literally worship him. Also, he's very shrewd and knows how to appeal to the masses. Take his nick-name, *El Indio*. To the people, this brings to mind Juarez, who was. . . ."

"I know—Paul Muni. The Abe Lincoln of Mexico." The way she'd thought of Babe Ruth, Grace could be 50, no matter how young she looked.

Sipping her coffee, she smiled at me—looking like a teenager again. "I like you, Toussiant, always envy a sense of humor. Also, it seems fitting with a name like Toussiant—you shall track down this phony Juarez. Needless to add: you can see the publicity value to Cuzo of being called *El Indio*. Other things endear him to the people beside his lack of fear—for one, he arrogantly and flatly refuses to fight in Spain, claims he has no use for the *gachupins*—a name like *gringo*—but used for the pure Spaniards. Oh, he's a show-man. He personally butchers the dead bull, giving the meat to the poor, after every fight. Keeps the heart and the muscles of the hump for himself—claims they keep him strong. Sheer nonsense, of course, but quite clever publicity."

Grace stopped to relight her cigarette. I could almost smell the 'evil' hanging over the room—although the only real stink in the house was my aromatic tobacco. "Was your husband a bull fighter?" I asked, to prove I was paying attention.

She looked startled, then laughed—a dry sound. "No, no, my Juan was a newspaper man. He hated Cuzo, the only critic who dared attack *El Indio*. Juan was dean of the Mexican critics, even recognized in Spain, a man of 60, matured-above bribes. Most critics are bribed by the matadors to insure favorable reviews. There was also an utterly silly . . . eh . . . personal factor involved. When the Indian learned Juan couldn't be bribed, he made a futile effort to reach Juan through me. Being a vain and cruel devil, Cuzo assumes all women are infatuated with him. It was merely a

matter of sending me a few flowers, but my Juan was furious. He tried to fight Cuzo in a bar, threw wine in his face. Unhappily, it became a minor scandal, blown out of all reality by Cuzo's fame. Some people hinted Juan criticized Cuzo so sharply solely because of this, which was ridiculous."

"Aha." With a 60-year-old dean-hubby, a trim piece like Grace—no matter her real age—and the Indian a 'young and handsome animal' . . .

"You can be very sure it was ridiculous," Grace said coldly.

"Okay, I'm sure," I said, because she expected me to.

"My husband was deeply interested in bull fighting, for him it represented the epitome of grace, man's constant battle with death. He loathed Jose for cheapening and degrading the national sport. As an honest critic, he felt the Indian was too good, so daring and sensational . . . there had to be some fake aspect involved. Juan never ceased his printed attacks on *El Indio*. This took courage—several times moronic fans threatened Juan. My husband was determined to prove Cuzo a fraud. A few days before Juan was murdered, he was terribly excited, claimed he had stumbled upon proof Jose was a vegetarian—this business about living on the muscles and heart of the bull was nonsense. I don't know if that has any real importance, but two days later Juan was dead."

Taking another sip of the strong coffee, which didn't warm the nervous chill in my guts, I asked, "How did your husband die?"

"He was bitten by a bushmaster, a deadly snake."

"What makes you certain it was murder? A man could be walking through the woods and. . .?"

"Juan was bitten in this house, asleep in his bed." She said it harshly, sharp eyes watching my reaction. I didn't know how I was supposed to react, so I shut up. After a moment of awkward silence, she asked, "Have you ever seen a bushmaster, Toussiant?"

"Nope. Snakes are hardly my idea of pets."

Grace jumped to her feet, a lithe, youthful movement. "No animal should suffer the indignity of being a 'pet,' neither a snake nor a human being. I want you to see something."

"I followed her down a narrow hallway—the walls bare. Passing an open door, I saw her bedroom, severe in its simplicity, the bedspread a corny pink lace job. The hallway made an L turn and Grace stopped at a locked door, took a key from her pants—which were so tight on her good hips, I was surprised she had room for a pocket. The moment she unlocked the door, this evil odorless smell hit me hard. She stepped into the semi-dark room, but I didn't move one step; my entire body was trembling.

Grace switched on a soft light. The walls of the room held a number of glass-fronted fish tanks, large and small, all of them having a little water, rocks, sand, or sticks and plants in them—plus the most hideous collection of snakes I'd ever seen—even in nightmares. Like a giant death supermarket, there were about 50 of these cages on shelves running around the large room. In the center stood a white metal table covered with notebooks, a scale, test tubes, microscope, and some other instruments.

Snakes have always terrified me and I had to fight down a very real urge to race the hell out of the house. Giving me a tight—maybe amused—smile, she asked, "Frightened? Of course you are—fear shows in every muscle of your face. These are all poisonous snakes—to use the popular term—but it is superstition to wildly fear them."

"But . . . aren't they dangerous?" I asked brightly, trying to keep my voice even.

"Danger is a comparative term. Everything on this earth is dangerous—in some aspect. Eat a fish too fast and you may choke to death on a bone; under certain circumstances an iced drink can cause heart failure; taken in too large a quantity, ordinary salt brings death." She took a deep breath, revealing tiny breasts. "Those two—over there—are bush-masters."

I followed her slender pointing finger to cages with a snake at least six feet long in each. Their scales were rough as a pineapple; the snakes a dull yellow and pink with black bands, large, flat, pointed heads. If their bodies were in a sluggish stupor, the merciless eyes seemed to be watching me.

"These are *Lachesis muta*, one of the three known varieties of the pit viper bushmaster." Grace suddenly crossed the room to look in on a slender little snake of dull green, crawling with a chilling slowness up a kind of cabbage plant growing in the cage. Almost to herself, she said, "I can't understand why this one refuses to eat. But her color is healthy, so. . . ."

Still standing on big feet of lead, I noticed the cages had screened tops, held shut merely by an ordinary door-type of hook.

"... This is a short-fanged member of the ring snakes. Like cobras, in that they hang on and chew after biting." Grace turned and grinned at me, added in her brittle voice, "Sorry, didn't mean to go off on a lecture. Shall we return to the living room?"

"Yeah." I hoped it came out casually: I was too damn frightened to think. I'd been a fool to imagine anybody would pay a hundred bucks a day and expenses for an easy job. I had only one clear thought—get out of this crazy room.

Snapping off the light, Grace carefully locked the door. I watched her slip the key into her pocket—without the smallest interest in those cute hips. Following her down the hallway, she said, "That's my serpentarium, one of the best private collections in this part of the world. I'm a herpetologist."

She flopped on the couch in her cross-legged position again. I sat down gingerly, glancing at the chair first to see if anything was wiggling. "What's that—you study herbs?"

"*Herp*-etologist. I'm in the Zoology Department at the University, doing research on the medicinal and curative

properties of snake venom. It is not only a physical science, but for me the most important philosophy of our time—proving the fallacy of our concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ There isn’t anything in our world all good or entirely evil. In short, if handled properly, if we can learn the true meaning of respect, the whole idea of evil can be banished from our world.”

I blinked, hardly hearing what she was running off at the mouth about. She lit another cigarette, shrugged, “Go ahead and say it, Toussiant.”

“Say what?”

“What you’re thinking—I killed my husband!”

“Frankly, I’ve been too scared to think anything.” I took a sip of the cold coffee, which didn’t help the dryness of my throat.

“I expect you to think that. Nor do I have to paint a picture of the whispered scandal Juan’s death has caused—the asinine rumors that Cuzo was my lover . . . the . . . Oh, I suppose I should have expected it: the husband of a snake expert dies from a snake bite.”

“Were you arrested?”

“No. I was suspect only in gossip. Far as the police were concerned, it was all an ‘accident’; the snake had somehow escaped from my lab. Mr. Moore, if you’re to find the murderer, the proof I want, you must firmly believe three things: I sincerely loved my husband and had not the smallest interest in Jose Cuzo; nor was his death an accident; and the snake involved was not one of mine.”

I nodded, wanted to say, “Sure, the client is always right.” But I merely asked, “Could anybody else—a servant—have left one of the cages—or whatever you call them—open, by mistake? The locks seemed flimsy to me; could a snake have pushed his way out?”

Grace shook her head, gave me a patronizing smile. “Toussiant, a snake is neither a monkey nor a tiger—never that active or aggressive. I alone have the keys to my lab. The servants fear to step inside the serpentarium. I work

alone, and as a scientist I make every effort to control all factors in my experiments, keep an exact record of each snake's weight, eating habits, etc. So I can assure you no snake of mine has ever 'escaped.' This is the other reason why I want Juan's killer captured—not only for the sake of justice, another abstract term—but also to clear the fog of scandal from my work, which I consider to be of the highest importance."

I relit my pipe, to do something. I was in great shape—working in a strange country on a weird murder—if there actually had been one—and if my client wasn't the murderer! I not only had a deadline—or lose my p.o. job—but was involved in something I feared and hadn't the slightest knowledge about—snakes.

"You think this . . . *El Indio* . . . is the actual killer?"

"Perhaps. More likely he hired the murderer."

"When did this happen?"

"Friday was ten weeks, to the day. I waited for the police to . . . act. Then, when I received the ad from your agency . . . well, here you are."

"Yeah. Frankly, you don't give me much to go on, Mrs. . . . Grace. So far all you have is a hunch Cuzo did it."

"I have one clue—of sorts." She jumped up again with the spring of a young girl and went over to a heavy desk. I watched her small bare feet, shivered again at the thought of her walking barefooted in that damn snake den. Or perhaps I had this queasy feeling at the thought of this oddly attractive woman handling snakes. I knew now what the aura of evil I'd felt in the house was.

From a desk drawer Grace took out a kind of bamboo cup, handed it to me. "This was found near Juan's bed that night."

I bounced it about on my palm—although I hated touching it. "What's this supposed to be?"

"I'm only certain it doesn't belong to anything in this house. From my studies, I know that among primitive tribes

in tropical climates—Mexico, South America, parts of Africa—wherever hollow bamboo joints are used for carrying water—there is a nasty custom of placing a snake inside a bamboo tube, capping it with something like this. You then sneak up on a sleeping, or unsuspecting enemy, dump an angry snake in his lap—or in his bed. I believe that is what happened to my Juan.”

“Were you in bed with him at the time?”

“We have—had—separate bedrooms. Our work hours conflicted and Juan generally retired early. I was in the serpentarium that night, updating my notes. I had the door closed—snakes can’t take a draught. Shortly after midnight I thought I heard somebody call out. Ophelia, my cook, often talks in her sleep. A few minutes later she knocked on the lab door, told me she’d heard a short scream from Juan’s room. I ran to him, but he was already swollen and pale—the snake had bitten him on the neck, the venom entering his blood stream at once. I rushed to the lab for antivenom but Juan was dead.”

“Was the snake still there?”

“Yes, on the bed. I bundled it into a blanket for safety, had Ophelia phone a doctor and the police. The police stupidly shot the bushmaster’s head off.”

“What did you expect them to do—handcuff it?”

Grace stared at me as if I’d spit on her. “The snake wasn’t at fault, merely a tool. It was a large specimen—bushmasters are fairly rare this far North—what was the sense in killing it?”

I could imagine a cop even hesitating before blasting the creepy reptile. “Did the police find any fingerprints in the bedroom, on the doors?”

“They were so sure it was an accident, one of my snakes, they never checked for prints, nor examined the ground outside the window. They told me that, weeks later.”

“You think the killer came through the window?”

“Yes. This is a one-story house, we had no reason to keep the windows locked.”

"Did the police check the cages in your lab?"

"At once. I tried to show them my records, happened to have a few empty cages at the time, but as I pointed out, there wasn't any water in the empty cages, the vegetation and . . . what I call background material—which fits in with the snakes natural habitat. This proved the cages had been empty for some time. The police refused to understand, in fact they spent very little time in the serpentarium."

"I can believe that! Anybody else work here except your cook? Was that Ophelia who brought us coffee?"

"Yes. She has been with me for years. Several times a month I have a man look after the lawn, and once a week Ophelia's granddaughter comes to help her clean."

I stood up. "Ophelia speak English?"

"No."

"Can I see the bedroom?"

Grace bounced to her feet like a dancer. "Certainly. I use it now; Ophelia sleeps in my former bedroom."

"Where did she sleep before?" I asked, as we started down the hallway, again.

"In the kitchen, on a mat."

Of course there wasn't a thing to see in the bedroom, except the closet only held a few dresses. I wondered again if Grace really had money. The window sill was three feet above the ground—a person could step into the room with ease, or toss a snake in from the window. I went through the motions, as if I knew what the hell I was looking for. "There a window in your lab?"

"No, merely a roof vent. The killer probably had no idea I was working—couldn't see my light—must have thought me asleep in my room."

"Obviously he knew you had separate bedrooms," I said, as if I'd made a startling discovery.

"With any part of the moon out, he could have seen who was in the bed."

"Had any trouble since then?"

She raised her eyebrows. "No. What made you ask that?"

"You said Mr. Lupe-Varon had been threatened by bullfight fans. . . . What sort of threats?"

"Mostly crank letters, remarks on the street—nothing really serious."

I realized I was holding on to the damn bamboo cap. I gave it back to her. She blew a cloud of smoke up at me. "I like you, Toussiant, you're honest—don't even try to hide your bewilderment."

"This is a hell of a case you're handing me."

She ran her eyes over me. "You're an imposing giant, give out an air of competence. Remember, the original Toussiant routed Napoleon's armies. As a customer, client, or whatever you label me, I'm very satisfied with you."

"You're hiring me, not buying me," I said, annoyed. "I . . ."

Grace suddenly ran her hand down my left side, sort of slapped my hips. "You're not carrying a gun."

"I haven't a permit to pack one down here."

"I've secured a pistol permit from the *Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional*, also purchased the gun—since I had to have the serial number."

"You think of everything."

"I am trained to handle details," she called over her shoulder. In the living room she stopped at the desk, handed me a snub-nosed .38 and a permit. "Sign the permit on this line, or it will not be valid."

I glanced at the .38; it was a new one, and loaded. I dropped it in my pocket, signed the permit and slipped that into my wallet. "I rarely use a gun, have more confidence in my hands."

"Be careful with your hands, never come too close to a professional snake handler: a person using snakes for murder is far more dangerous than a gangster or a gunman."

"Thanks for the tip. I'll start working—be in touch with you. Can I phone for a cab?"

"I'll drive you to your hotel. I should change—slacks are

not approved here for women. But then, I've always been a puzzling '*gringo*' to most Mexicans."

I could have added, "You're even more of a puzzle to me."

I followed her out into the hot sunlight. She was still barefooted as we crossed the short grass and gravel to a small garage in the rear of the house, and a Chevvy roadster which was at least 6 years old.

Although I felt far better being out of the house, I seemed doped by the high altitude. Grace was an expert driver and I must have dozed off—opened my eyes to find we were in front of Prince Montio. "Sorry," I said, trying to swallow a yawn. "The thin air."

"Takes several days to become accustomed to it. Phone me if you need anything—but not during noon and two—my *siesta*. You can also reach me at the University. I've written both numbers on a slip of paper—put it in your pocket, next to your gun."

"Thanks." I got out of the car. Grace was a real handy-anne. As she drove off, a cop in a snappy dark uniform came over, pointing to a small metal American flag pinned above his chest pocket. He was a handsome, sharp-faced, tan cat. "You look puzzled, Senor. I speak English. Can I be of help to you?"

"Thanks. I'm okay—I think."

It was a few minutes before 4 p.m. when I walked into the ancient lobby of the hotel, but I was as sleepy as if it was four in the morning. I decided to wait a few hours before calling Fran—when she'd certainly be home for supper. Reaching my room, I tossed the gun in the dresser drawer, took off my shirt and suit, and hit the bed. Minutes later I dragged my mind awake—a kind of mental surfacing. I vaguely knew something was wrong—an understatement in this case. But the rear of my mind was being tickled by some item I'd overlooked.

Groggy, I wondered if it could be the gun permit Grace had secured for me. No matter how few clothes she had, the

old car—she had to have friends in high places to obtain a permit without my being there to sign the application. Be hard as hell to swing it in the States. But with all her pull, and if hubby had been such a big-time newspaper man—it was strange the police had paid so little attention to her murder idea. Or had they? I practically had to take Grace's word for everything down here. Could be another answer—the bullfighter had more influence than Grace? Hadn't she hinted at that? Then, too, the police may have been doing Grace a favor by not investigating it as murder—she might have ended up being indicted.

Still, if she had knocked off her husband, only a neurotic or outright loony would start a murder investigation. The very last thing Grace seemed was an addle-head. For all I knew, she could still be under suspicion of murder this minute, and looking for a patsy—me? But that didn't make sense—I, or any other operator from the States, would have a perfect alibi.

Instead of standing around that damn house thinking of snakes, I should have asked about the husband's relatives, how he stood with them. Did he leave any insurance? Assuming Cuzo wasn't Grace's boyfriend—did she have any other johns on the string? There probably was some sort of Freudian hook-up with her love for the damn reptiles. Although Grace struck me as a cold tomato, she could be hotter than a fire-cracker between the sheets. However, hubby hadn't shared her bed. . . . ? Hell, I wasn't hired as her analyst. Something connected with the gun was bothering me. . . .

Coming all-awake fast, I jumped out of bed and opened the dresser drawer. The pistol was on *top* of my torn red T-shirt, which I'd shoved out of sight under my regular shirts when I'd unpacked—my room had been searched!

It only took a second to look through the rest of my things, my coat hanging in the closet. Nothing was missing, but in the closet I found myself listening for the hiss of a snake.

Lighting my pipe, I sat on the bed and tried to think. What would anybody expect to find in my room? Who even knew I was in Mexico? I hadn't known I was coming down here myself, 24 hours ago! Perhaps it was only the maid straightening up the room...? But maids wouldn't go through a drawer—or was this one a sneak thief? I laughed aloud—I was even beginning to think like a dumb tourist.

Picking up the gun I examined it again. Far as I could tell, it had never been used. The net result of all my expert thinking was a mild headache.

Washing up, I dressed, then took the few travel folders I'd picked up on the plane, some socks, plus my shaving kit, piled them on top of the dresser. Removing a shoe lace, I placed the stuff exactly the length of the lace away from the edge of the dresser. Relacing my shoe, I took the gun and went out. The lock on my door was such an old fashioned deal any smart mouse could have picked it open.

In the lobby I gave my key to the elderly clothes dummy behind the desk, had him put through a call to New York. It was nearly six; Fran should be home.

She wasn't, and my headache grew worse. I had the clerk check the number he'd called, which put us both in a bad mood. Then I asked where I could find a leather goods shop. He perked up—gave me detailed directions plus a card with his name on it. I found the shop easily; it was full of bags and sandals. Carrying a gun in your pocket is not only a poor form of advertising, but a fast way of ruining a suit. Walking around in the twilight, I finally came upon a sporting goods store, and purchased a hip holster.

It was turning cold again, so I went up to my hotel room, put the holster on my belt, and measured the junk on top of my dresser—it hadn't been moved. Of course, there was little reason for anybody searching my room twice. Taking my coat, I went downstairs and had the clerk put through another call to Fran—still no answer. I told myself to stop worrying, she was probably visiting, or had gone to a

movie—Fran hated eating alone. But like everything else happening, I didn't believe that.

The clerk asked if I had found what I wanted in the shop he'd steered me to, looked downcast when I told him—no. I started walking around the city—mainly because I didn't know what else to do—which was coming alive with noise and gaudy neon signs. Passing the first bull fight poster, I studied a picture of *El Indio*. He had a wide, flat, face—cheek bones well up in his puss—all his skin tight, like a welter who has trouble making the weight. Of course a poster drawing didn't mean a thing, but even with the comical matorador's hat, he was a hard-looking stud. A guy who. . . .

"Toussiant, old man!"

I spun about to see Frank Smith's brown face grinning at me from under an old green beret, the rest of him looking very natty in a white trench coat. In fact, except for the color of his skin, he could have been a TV private eye.

"Thought you'd blown town?" I asked, shaking his hand, glad to see the old liar.

"Found myself in a writing mood this afternoon, so I've decided to stick around for as long as the creative juices continue to spurt. I'm like an old clipper vessel, moving about at the whim of the wind," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. "Home-boy, let me buy you a drink."

"Why not?" Smith was certainly right about the windy part. I pointed at the bull fight poster. "This Indian joker any good?"

"*El Indio*?" Smith repeated, walking me into a bar playing a rumba—or something like that—on a loud juke. It was a fancy joint, with the booths done in silver-studded leather. Smith ordered two drinks. I asked for a beer.

Taking out a dark cigar, Smith chewed on it gently, grinning at me as if he'd stumbled over a long-lost pal. "Forget beer—you can guzzle that anyplace. I've ordered us a drink called Tequila Grenade. A master of simplicity in this complicated world; grenadine and grapefruit juice cover the harsh tequila taste. What were you asking me, before?"

"*El Indio*—is he any good?"

"Man, if you were outside now, the heavens would open and strike you dead—even questioning *El Indio's* talent is blasphemy here, but a blast! Far as the *amigos* are concerned, he's the greatest. They may not be wrong, either."

"I've never seen a bull fight—think I'll go tomorrow."

"I may go with you—we have to get seats in advance. It happens that bull fighting is one of the sub-themes of my book."

"Fine, you'll be able to explain the inside moves, and stuff."

Smith nodded, "My man, you have the right party for that. You're in for quite a sight—naked proof of man's innate cruelty. Although no more cruel than boxing, child labor, war . . . many other things. I wouldn't object if it was labeled an exhibition in sheer cruelty, but to call it a sport, to have so many of our intellectuals drool over it—exactly what I'm attacking in my book on. . . ."

The waiter cut Smith off by bringing the drinks. The over-sweet cocktail had a sneaky kick. I started Smith again by saying, "I'm lucky, seeing the best in my first fight."

"Cuzo puts on a dazzling display of speed and daring. The old order changes—he's in tune with the times, changing the hell out of bull fighting. Glad he is streamlining it, I've sweated out far too many hours in the rings. With the sun bearing down on thousands of sweating souls, man, it becomes a Turkish bath. But I'll save my lecture until we're watching the butchering. Did you see your friends?"

"What friends?"

For a moment Smith's face turned solemn. "When I last saw you—on your way to look up some friends—of friends—I believe you said."

"Yeah, I found . . . them," I said, cautiously. "Slipped me a polite cup of coffee, and may have me over for supper. Which is all a guy barging in can expect. Mostly, I've been trying to get the feel of the city, walking about. Tell me more about this matador, Cuzo."

Smith had to impress me with his knowledge of bull rings. He talked through two more rounds of drinks—I was kind of floating. I tried getting in a few questions about *El Indio*, but Smith was busy yacking about Maera, Joselito, Belmonte,—all famous and old matadors; working his way through bull history, coming up to Cuzo, I suppose. When he signaled for another round of these sweet bullets, I cut in with, “Look, I have to eat—but fast.”

“Good idea. I know one of the best restaurants in Mexico City, well off the tourist beat.”

“Let’s go,” I said, pulling out some money.

“This is on me, Toussiant, I insist,” Smith said, yanking out his wallet—thick with Mexican money. “I just cashed a check.”

I let him pay.

We walked out into the cool night and my head stopped floating in space, hovered above my neck. A one-armed man stopped us and we bought a couple of his lottery tickets. As we walked about a mile into the older part of the city, a kind of slum area, Smith was beating his gums about the times he’d come close to winning the lottery. It seemed he was also an authority on gambling.

We went into a small restaurant with coarse paper tablecloths, sawdust on the rough floor. Since we were the only non-Mexicans in the place, and I was starving, I told Smith to do the ordering—he probably knew about real Mexican chow, too.

He rattled off much fast Spanish and soon we had a dry wine, then a thick soup which looked like—and was—minestrone. This was followed by the main dish, ordinary roast lamb, and a plain salad of tomatoes and lettuce. The food was simple but good and my headache vanished as I ate. Smith asked, “Great cooking, isn’t it, home-boy?”

“You know any place where I can get some *real* Mexican food?”

“Indeed, I know an excellent restaurant, finest Mexican food I’ve ever tasted—*tamales*, *tacos*, *enchilados*, and they

make a turkey dish called *mole de guajolete* which melts in your mouth," Smith said, playing it straight. "It's on 45th Street, East of Broadway—up in New York City!" He burst out in deep laughter.

"Thanks for telling me where 45th Street and Broadway is."

"I'll show you some places here, but it's best to stay out of the run-of-the-mill eating joints. Getting the runs isn't serious, but a hell of a nuisance. Let's see, not quite nine o'clock: what would you like to do tonight? Throw back our heads and get high? Take in a movie? A night spot? Whores?"

"I'm kind of bushed—the change in climate. Think I'll head for the hotel and bed."

"Of course, I forgot—it takes a few days to get one's self regulated to the high altitude. We'll have dessert and our coffee, and on the way to the hotel we shall buy seats for tomorrow's bull fight."

I was afraid that if I asked for apple pie for dessert I'd get it. Smith ordered some kind of hard cakes, which tasted like old almonds, and the same thick coffee I'd had at Grace's. Again, he insisted upon paying the tab.

The later the hour, the more Mexico City seemed to come alive. Frank took me to a crowded shop, a kind of ticket agency—although most people seemed to be merely standing about and gassing. We bought two tickets and this time I made the pitch about paying—it cost me twenty bucks. Leaving the shop, we turned into an ancient cobblestone street, narrow and stinking. Smith pointed to a crummy hotel, told me, "Most of the matadors live in that dive. Amazing, since they earn big money, but the eve of a fight they always stay in this trap."

The hotel was actually mossy-looking. A skinny young woman with bright corn-blond hair, and wearing a cheap print dress—came staggering out of the hotel, headed for the corner drugstore, walking with the careful have-to-hold-myself-in pose of a lush. Some Mexican men lounging in the

doorway of a bar followed her down the street with their eyes and whispered laughter. "That a blonde Mexican?" I asked, stupidly.

Smith laughed. "No man, that's a made-in-USA-doll—and made often. Cuzo picked her up in Texas—and remember he's just another 'Spic' above the border—but she came along with him and now he's giving her the brush. Strange isn't it, the more dangerous the sport: matadors, speed car drivers, pugs, the easier it is for any babe to lay hold of their hard-earned loot."

"How come you know all this inside gossip?"

Smith put his arm around my shoulder, gave me a big grin. "Mexico City is a small town—when it comes to gossip—despite its being one of the world's great cities. My theory is, the high illiteracy rate causes all the gossip."

"Could be," I said cleverly, as we walked toward the hotel. "Since you're in the know, Frank, did you ever hear of a bullfight critic called Juan Lupe-Varon? I once read an article by him—in some New York sport mag—saying *El Indio* wasn't any ball of fire."

Smith turned and smiled right in my face. "Certainly I've heard of him. The old boy hated Cuzo's guts—the matador was said to be putting his *pica* in the critic's wife—a trim dish; say that backwards and you have a lousy pun. Ever seen her, Toussiant?"

I suddenly knew damn well Smith had seen Grace drive me up to the hotel. I said, "There was a woman by that name at my friend's house this afternoon. She took me back to the hotel. Never thought of it before, but the same name—could have been his wife." Being a clumsy liar, I added, "But he wasn't there."

"If he had been, we'd all be in a bad way," Smith said with a smug chuckle. "The husband is dead. Some people say he died in his sleep of natural causes—but the gossip bilge hints the young wife knocked off hubby. If she did, didn't do her any good—Cuzo plays the field, hard."

"Maybe Cuzo got tired of the critic's bad notices?"

Smith glanced at me. "How come you're so interested in this one bull stabber, Toussiant?"

"I don't know, he's the only one I've read about. Told me yourself, *El Indio's* the biggest in the business," I said, going for innocent.

"He doesn't rate in Spain because he won't fight there, making him a bigger attraction here. The Spanish matadors consider working Mexico City like touring the sticks. The Spanish critics call Cuzo a clown, but that's probably because he isn't paying them off. In Spain, and perhaps here—for all I know—the papers don't pay the critics a salary; the critic gives the paper a cut of his take."

"Come on, they don't really pay for their job?"

"Man, they sure do. A matador slips a critic about four or five thousand *pesetas* before each ring session. That's about . . . \$800. Considering there may be two, or even three top matadors working in the arena, the critic takes in over \$1500 for that Sunday. Figure yourself what \$1500 does in a poor country like Spain, even if pieced-up a few ways. Also, there can be as many as four or six critics to grease, so you see what a big business slicing the bull is. I'm going to expose the hell out of it in my book—not attacking the matadors, but our own intellectuals who've white-washed this corrupt 'sport'."

"Maybe Mr. Lupe-Varon was above holding out his palm? This article I read—it slammed into Cuzo."

Smith laughed again; his arm around my shoulder hugging me. Down here, we didn't attract any attention walking this way—except for a few glances at two big dark-skinned jokers—but in the States we would have been put down as a couple of faggots. In fact, I was wondering if my boon buddy—Frank—wasn't a little on the queer side of the fence.

"As a writer, Toussiant, let me give you one bit of considered advice—never believe the printed word. Lupe-Varon had his hand as far out as the rest of them. He left a big bundle when he died."

We'd reached the hotel and Smith asked, "How about a night cap?"

"Some other night. I want to put through a call to my wife, in New York. Haven't been able to reach her all day. I'm worried—she's pregnant." The words slipped out—I didn't know why I told Smith.

"Well, must be your first, if you're worried."

"That's right. You have kids, Frank?"

"Sure, all over the country!" he said, knocking himself out with his own laughter.

I'd had all of his corn I could take, said I'd see him in the morning. "Right, chap," he said, feeling my shoulder again. "Tell you, Toussiant, when a couple of club members get together down here, we have more of a ball than our grey cousins. I really enjoyed tonight."

Smith went to his room while I had the desk clerk put in a call to Frances. He'd been dusting the lobby, but quickly slipped on his tux-coat and starched bib to make the call. She still wasn't home. I considered phoning her folks in Ohio, but didn't. If Fran had thought of going there, she would have told me . . . maybe.

I went to the nearest bar, had a beer. A half hour later I returned to the hotel, and the clerk tried again.

By midnight I was frantic with worry and high on Mexican beer. Yet the sound of Fran's voice—even sounding metallic over a couple thousand miles of wire—was a giant tranquilizer. I said, "Honey, I've been trying to call you all day. Where have you been?"

"Home, where I belong! I . . . I'm sorry, Touie. Did you get my letter? Of course not, I mailed it this morning. I've been in and out of the house—didn't think you would call after I received your wire, so . . ."

"What letter?"

"A kind of make-up note. I mean, I'm sorry I made the baby my private affair. It's yours as much as mine and you have the right to. . ."

"How are you feeling, hon?"

"Lonely, but bubbling over with health. How's the case coming, Touie?"

"Seems like nothing," I said, not wanting to worry her. "So far, the most work I've done is trying to reach you."

"Is Mexico City exciting?"

"Aha."

"Touie, as I wrote in my letter, I'm going to see about getting next week off. Be like a second honeymoon. Darling, it's so good to hear your voice!"

I said I'd call her again the following Sunday and we cooed and talked for another couple of bucks, then I hung up—had the desk clerk put it on my bill. I felt so relaxed I didn't even imagine I heard the hissing of snakes when I turned on the light in my room, undressed. I did measure the stuff on my dresser with the shoelace—it hadn't been moved. Tossing the gun in the drawer, I hit the sheets.

The next thing I knew there was a mild pounding on the door. I stretched in bed, sat up, asked, "Yeah?" The day was bright with the sun. I felt wonderful.

"Toussiant, this is Frank Smith. Man, it's five to one."

I jumped out of bed, flexed my arms, and opened the door. Smith was puffing on a short cigar and togged out in snappy light slacks, a Cuban sport shirt, black and white Italian shoes. "I've been trying to get you up for the last hour—thought you were dead."

"This thin air really hit me," I said, yawning. "Come in while I dress. We late for the fights?"

"No, take your time," he said, sitting on the only empty chair in the room. "You're sure a big stud—how do you keep in shape?"

"Delivering the mail is a form of exercise," I said, going to the bathroom.

"Athlete in your day?"

"Played some football. Your face looks like you stopped leather once."

"I did a little of everything in my prime. Runner, amateur pug, skater. Used to be a damn good outfielder, but that was

long before the big leagues believed a brown hand could catch a ball good as a white paw. You must indeed be healthy, my man, pounding your ear on a Sunday morning with church bells ringing all over town."

"Spoke to my wife last night, felt relaxed."

While I dressed, Smith chattered about Chicago's South Side, then about Harlem. It had been a long time since he'd been in New York—didn't know the face of Lenox Avenue had been changed by projects and luxury apartments.

While Smith used my john, I put on my holster. Downstairs I had coffee and a bang-up order of ham and eggs, as he worked on a beer.

I believed Frank when he said Mexico City has the world's largest bull ring—the noisy arena was jammed solid with at least 50,000 people. Admissions alone made it big business, plus the fact everybody was eating like mad. We had good seats, in the shade, but it was very hot and I was sorry I'd taken the gun—couldn't remove my jacket.

Smith was a real guide type, filling my ears with yarns about El Callo, Granero, claimed he'd once met Sidney Franklin. Finishing a history of great matadors, he started on the various kinds of wounds—*cornada de cabello*, how a mild bruise was called a *varetazo*. All of which I let in one big ear and out the other. Next Sunday he'd take me to a rodeo-fiesta to see cowboys—*charros*—do their stuff. I was happy he was going to stay the week—I'd need a translator.

With a circus blast of music, the matadors marched around the arena in their fancy gold outfits. Cuzo's was a conservative black with a minimum of gold trimming—making him stand out.

Smith started filling me in with odds and ends of ring data: because Cuzo worked so fast, he generally fought only one bull instead of two. The bull was never allowed to see a man on foot, until he entered the ring. The reason the matadors wore tight suits—the bull was color blind, reacted to the movement of the cape, not the color—the tight suits made certain nothing moved except the cape.

Cuzo had the starting bull and although this was my first fight—and I was rooting for the bull—I knew the Indian was tremendous. Looking a lean 150 pounds in his tight pants and ballet slippers, not even the silly queue attached to his hat softening the toughness of his face, Cuzo moved with tiger-speed. The crowd began chanting, "*Indio! Indio!*" the moment he took his bow.

Nor did he waste a second. About 1500 pounds of sleek, black, bull muscle came snorting and charging into the sandy ring. Cuzo walked out casually, holding a *banderilla* in each hand. Moving slowly toward the bull, who was pawing the sand—twitching his tail nervously, Cuzo suddenly ran straight at the animal, side-stepped, and planted both ribboned spears in the great hump of muscle behind the beast's neck.

With the crowd screaming, *El Indio* strutted around the ring, back to the bull as if he couldn't care less. Bowing to some official up in a box, Cuzo waved to the audience, then took his cape and, what Smith claimed was a fake, wooden sword from an assistant. Walking calmly toward the bull, Cuzo executed some really breath-taking passes, often sucking in his flat stomach to allow the great horns to miss him by the smallest fraction of an inch.

The crowd went crazy at the complete contempt with which Cuzo treated the bloody and sweaty bull. Frank was all tensed up, kept saying the Indian was stupid-brave, would surely be gored "one of these days." But Cuzo moved as if knowing exactly what he was doing. Finally, minutes later, he called for a real sword and with the fans screaming, faced the bull. The big animal charged like an express train: *El Indio* seemed to lean over between the horns—his body and the bull's all one for a split second. Cuzo straightened up and kind of skipped to one side, leaving the sword buried to the hilt in the hump of the beast's shoulder muscles. The Indian now walked away, as if bored. The bull took a few wobbly steps after him, then crashing to his knees, seemed to stare at us crazy humans with bewildered soft eyes . . . fell over on his side—dead.

I sat there, sweating in the sun and human heat, the prayer-like chanting of "*Indio! Indio!*" hitting my head like padded hammers. Cuzo blew kisses at the fans, and left as the bull was dragged from the arena. In all this heat, I figured they couldn't keep the dead animal long.

Frank said, "Cuzo is one of the few matadors who refuses the ears or the bull's tail after a fast kill. All his killings are quick as . . ."

"Where does this joker put on the free butchering act?"

"In a field, back of the parking lot."

"When?"

"Soon as he dresses. You've seen the flash, now the next matador will fight in the classical tradition, which so delights Hemingway and Ava . . ."

I stood up. "I'm going to catch the free meat scene."

"But once you leave the arena, you'll never get back in? There are three more bulls to be killed and . . ."

"Tell me about it when I see you at the hotel, later. Heat is too much for me."

Frank got up to let me pass, grabbing my waist for a moment to balance himself. "The heat or the sight of blood, Toussiant?" he asked with a smug chuckle. But it seemed to me he suddenly looked sick himself, as I pushed toward the aisle.

The air outside the arena was almost cool. A group of ragged people—many kids—were gathered in a barren field behind the parking lot; human flies around the dead bull. The same people who had cheered the beast's death were now waiting to eat him. I walked over slowly, then stood around, trying to fan myself—all of me sticky. About a half hour later a dull yell went up as Jose approached, wearing a fresh white butcher's coat over his sharp linen suit. He was surrounded by punks dressed in cheap and loud clothes: hangers-on look the same the world over.

I remained on the edge of the mob, smoking my pipe to kill the stink of unwashed bodies (including mine.) One of his entourage handed Cuzo a hell of a big knife, and with

expert skill the Indian quickly skinned part of the animal, slicing off bloody chunks of the hump muscles, digging in with the knife until he held the large, dripping heart in his left hand. Holding it out carefully—so the blood didn't drip on his sharp shoes—*El Indio* made a short speech, probably some nonsense about the bull's heart giving him strength.

The hungry crowd dutifully cheered, pressing forward as Jose handed the knife to another guy—wearing a stained butcher's apron—who began cutting up the bull, handing slices of raw meat to eager hands. They all seemed to enjoy being splattered with blood. Placing his share in large, plastic bags, Cuzo wiped his hands on a damp towel held by another of his followers.

I stood there, smoking, sweating, watching—wondering why Grace's late hubby had been so excited about thinking *El Indio* was a vegetarian. You don't kill merely because you prefer carrot juice over steak. One thing was for sure—Jose was a born pitchman, could really put out his own brand of bull.

As Cuzo took the plastic bags full of meat—a good ten or fifteen pounds—one of his buddies whispered something and the matador turned to glance at me. I was a stand-out, not only because of my dark skin and my own beef—I was the only non-Mexican. Still holding the bloody plastic bags, Cuzo made his way over to me, asked in fair English, "Senor, you seek bull meat?"

"Never touch the stuff—I'm a vegetarian," I said, wondering if I was saying the right thing. Cuzo was taller than I'd thought—a slim six-footer.

"Then you are fool, the hot blood of the bull makes for a man."

"You think so?" I asked, giving him my best blank look.

He suddenly laughed, showing crooked white teeth against the creamy yellow of his skin. "You enjoy watch bull fight?"

"I'm not sure—this was my first time. You're good."

"The busted nose—you also look athlete. Senor, you tourist? Come to Mexico to see the sights?"

I shrugged. "I seek the answer to the moment of truth," I corn-balled.

The hard smile fled his tough puss, cheeks turning dull while the brightness in his eyes increased. Even slit-narrow, they were bright as gems. He walked away abruptly, still lugging the bags of meat. Without stopping he called back, "*Amigo*, remember well . . . there is only one answer to the moment of truth—death!"

It certainly sounded like a hell of a profound statement.

Chapter 4

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I TOOK A CAB to the hotel. The chambermaid had already straightened the room, so there wasn't any point in measuring the things on my dresser. After a cold shower I stretched out on the bed to do my best work on this case—doze off.

I was puzzled at Cuzo singling me out. Did he know I was working for Grace, or did he brown-nose all tourists? When I had supper with Smith, I'd tell him about talking to *El Indio*, act the new *aficionado*-jerk: ask Smith to show me the bars where the bull crowd hung out. There was no telling what I might pick up, and besides—I frankly couldn't think of any other move. I considered taking Frank into my confidence, perhaps hiring him for a few hundred bucks—he could dig up stuff I couldn't possibly know about. But I didn't know how far I could trust the windy fourflusher—if at all.

When I awoke it was dark outside and cool. It was a few minutes before 9 and I was starved—as usual. Smith had never told me his room number, and when I went down to ask the cardboard-faced desk clerk—who seemed even paler than the day man, I was told: "Senor Smith checked out this afternoon."

"Checked out? When?"

"As I was coming on duty, shortly before you returned from the bull ring. Senor Smith seemed in a large hurry."

"He leave any forwarding address?"

"No, senor."

"Does he stay here often?"

"I never see Senor Smith until he register the day before you arrive. He is not a friend of yours, Senor Moore?"

"I wish I knew," I said, handing him my key.

I walked about aimlessly for a moment until two kids peddling lottery tickets surrounded me. After buying a ticket from each of them, I headed toward the old section of the city and Cuzo's hotel. Being a Sunday night, the stores were shut and the streets empty. The lottery kids had given me a vague idea about picking up one of these amateur tourist shills, hiring him for a couple of days as interpreter and guide. What little plans I had for the case were shot with Smith's sudden take-off. It was strange he hadn't mentioned a word about leaving, at the bull ring.

To my surprise I found the now-deserted street on which the matador's crummy hotel faced. If the rest of Mexico City was quiet, the hotel was busy—a large and fat young Mexican man was throwing out a dizzy blonde girl. She was cursing fatty in loud English and Spanish, trying to fight her way back into the dive. A few men were standing behind the upstairs windows, grinning down at the little show. Blondie's shrill voice was calling lumpy everything but a child of God.

When I realized the blonde babe was the one Smith had pointed out as Cuzo's gal friend, I walked faster. The lardy man tossed a cheap suitcase at her, then slapped her big loud mouth, knocking her down on top of the suitcase. This rated a lot of flashy smiles from the jokers watching behind the windows.

Racing over, I doubled the Mexican with a Sunday-punch to his soft gut, slapped his nose with my right. A little thing like a bloody nose takes the fight out of most oscar. Helping Miss Blonde Bag of Bones to her feet, I asked, "Anything I can do for you?"

She was juiced; it took her a moment to get me in focus. The coarse-featured face had a tiny button-nose looking as though it had been added as an afterthought. If she wasn't pretty, the face was so unusual . . . it was attractive. Rocking on her feet, she stared at me, then smiled and drawled, "What's this, the US Marines to the rescue? Big and dark Marines."

Despite the drawl I let the 'Dark' business go by—I needed this dame badly, and she had said it with a smile.

Running her eyes over me, she drawled, "You are a big one."

"Yeah. Let's scam before fat-boy calls his friends." Picking up the flimsy suitcase, I looked around for a taxi.

Brushing off the shabby print dress, rubbing her face where fatty had slapped her, she shrugged, said, "Big boy, I'm with you."

"Then cut the 'boy' crap!" I snapped. Holding the bag in one hand, her bony mitt in my other, we started walking away when Cuzo opened the hotel window and let loose a Spanish barrage. Blondie spun out of my hand, staggering on her silly spike heels, screaming Spanish curses. Without knowing the language, I had a fair idea what she was calling his mother.

Two hangers-on back of him vanished from view as Cuzo called down in English, "So, the dark senor is interested in meat—blonde meat. It is truly said: one man's garbage can be another's feast!"

"You play with bulls, what do you know about women?" I yelled, wondering how far I wanted to steam *El Indio*—if at all.

As blondie flung out a fresh string of Spanish curses, I grabbed her arm. "We've had it—let's blow!"

We were a few yards up the street when I heard running footsteps behind us. The punks who'd left Cuzo were coming. "Stay put," I told blondie, trotting toward the two jokers. I didn't see anything in their hands, although one of them had his right in his hip pocket. They expected me to stop short, throw a punch, maybe reach for something. Football taught me it's the unexpected blow which takes a guy out. I simply ran smack into them, by 200 odd pounds sending them sprawling.

Turning, I stepped over one of the clowns—gasping for breath—ran back to blondie. She said, "Hey, now, for a guy your build you sure can step. Bowled them over like. . . ."

"Where's a cab?"

"Usually one parked around the next corner."

"Let's go."

"Wait, these lousy cobblestones are hell on heels." Removing her shoes, she ran bare-footed, long yellow hair waving in the night behind her like a banner. Rounding the corner, she pointed to an ancient car, panted, "Taxi!"

I opened the door, slid in after her. The driver, an elderly fellow with a moon face and wearing a threadbare U.S. Army jacket, didn't bat an eye at a 'gringo' woman racing bare-footed. Giving us his best strictly-for-tourists-grin, he asked, "Senor, where have I pleasure driving you?"

"Drive that way—fast!" I pointed toward a dark street which angled into the corner.

He looked puzzled. Blondie panted something in Spanish and the driver shrugged, took off. Crossing the street we'd been running on, I saw the two punks still sitting there, but otherwise all was peaceful.

For a long moment we seemed to be speeding through streets of shacks, then the driver called out in Spanish. Blondie asked, "Where we going, big boy? This is a dead end drag."

"Told you to cut the 'boy' bit. Where were you headed for?"

"Wherever you're padded down, big . . . fellow," she drawled. "I haven't a *peso*."

"Suppose I get you a room at my hotel?"

"I'm with that suppose, buying it all the way, big . . . mans." She curled her thin lips in what was meant to be a hot smile.

"I haven't had supper. Food interest you, too, Miss. . . ?"

"Never pass up a meal, I say. My name is Janis Kent. What do I call you, when I'm not mad?"

"Toussiant. Touie will do fine."

"Well, now, ain't that a cute handle, right fancy name," she drawled. The southern accent was getting on my nerves.

"You speak Spanish fine—been in Mexico City long, Janis?"

"Honey, I been in Mexico plenty of times, but this trip—only three or four weeks." She brushed her bright blonde hair back from her thin shoulders. "Yellow hair is a big deal here, for the lovers. . . ."

"It's only so much hair with me, Janis."

The driver slowed down and asked her something. She asked, "Touie, you have any special chow joint in mind? I know a nice little place which has good grub."

"Is it near the hotel where I . . . we met? I don't like exercise while eating."

"Way on the other side of town." She gave the driver directions and then sat back, asked, "You a tourist, hon?"

"In a way. Mixing business and sight-seeing. I'm a writer, doing a piece on Mexico for a New York magazine. I need a guide, somebody who speaks the lingo. You interested in ten bucks a day, room and meals, plus a plane ticket back to the States? Be a few days, or a week."

"Hon, you just hired yourself a gal. Treat me right, Touie, and I ain't a bad broad." She squeezed my hand. I glanced at her pale, bony paw in my dark hand—knew white womanhood was going to raise its corny head soon.

The restaurant didn't look like much from the outside, and less on the inside, but it was clean. I let her order, and the first thing she ordered was two shots of some hard stuff called *mezcal*. I couldn't finish mine; she took care of both drinks—the running had sobered her—a little. Then the "good ole Mexican food" came—broiled steaks and french fries. "Real Texas steer meat, hon!" Janis told me, her lips drooling with steak-blood.

In the light, her thin, pale face looked almost childishly pathetic, heavy lipstick peeling or smeared over her chin, but the drunken eyes were friendly and gay. Being that her drawl grated my nerves, she had to be a babe who loved to talk—in the chatter department she outdid Smith. Without my asking, Janis gave me a fast rundown on her life—raised by a number of aunts, married at 15, hubby left before she was 17; she'd drifted around waiting on table in many towns . . .

not an outright tramp only because she didn't have the looks I thought—smugly.

Janis had at least one talent—she could drink. After her fifth shot of this Mexican paint remover, I told her to take it easy, she was slurring her words. Winking, she said, "Don't you worry your big head, bossman, I never get falling-down drunk. I been knocking off a pint a day since I was 15."

In the cab to the hotel I asked—innocently, "The hard-looking guy shouting at you from the window—your husband?"

"Joey? You for true? He's a cheap louse, a bull fighter."

"A matador?" I said, like a ham actor. "Thought his face looked . . . was that *the* Jose Cuzo? I saw him in the ring today. He's a big shot."

"A big shot bastard. I was waiting tables in Brownsville when he breezed through. I take off with him and now I get the brush, without even a return ticket or one stinking *peso*. He's a cruel crud."

Without thinking I patted her hand—happily.

We reached my hotel shortly before midnight. Janis had taken a mangy and wrinkled old white camel's hair coat from her suitcase, leaving only a few undies in the cheap bag. She looked more like a whore with the coat on. When I told the desk clerk I wanted a room for my secretary, he merely asked, "You wish to change to a room with a double bed?"

"No, I want a separate room for her, on my floor, if possible."

"The room adjoining your's is vacant, will that be satisfactory, Senor Moore?"

I said it would.

"It will take some minutes to prepare the room," he said, reaching for his porter's jacket.

"We'll be waiting in my room."

Riding the elevator, Janis leaned against me, said in *mezcal*-scented words, "No sense wasting your dough on two rooms, big . . ."

"Janis, although I'm hiring you as a guide, I hardly need one in bed."

She glanced around my room with approval, then lit a butt, sat on the bed. I got her an ash tray. Janis removed her shoes, sat with her head against the wall, knees facing me. She could have left her shoes on, her feet were that dirty from running on the cobblestones. My trained detective eyes immediately deducted Janis was a natural blonde, and despite her scrawny legs, the hips were astonishingly full.

Funny thing with grey chicks, no matter how they look, they're always so sure their white skin is the sexiest ever. I said, "Stop reaching, Janis: put your legs and skirt down."

"Fresh!" she said, the word nearly breaking me up. "Don't you like what you see, big boy?"

"Would you be serving your hips up on a platter if we were in Brownsville?"

"In Texas I wouldn't dare be found dead with you. Just as I wouldn't walk barefooted there, or break any other conventions."

"Glad to know I'm a convention."

"What do you want me to say, Touie? I'm being honest with you."

"Yeah, guess you are."

"Also, we're not in Texas. I'm queer for that crooked nose of yours. When in Rome, do as the . . ."

"Janis, I'm not interested."

"Balls!" she snarled. "What's the matter, am I so ugly?"

"No. I find your face attractive, but I'm married."

"Oh, you corny clown, so what?" She suddenly straightened out her legs. "Your wife here with you?"

"No. Look, let's have some level talk. I wasn't joking about hiring a . . . guide. But that's your sole job. I haven't sex on my mind . . . my wife's having a baby."

The very sound of the words were stupid—to me. Janis actually clapped her hands, gave me a delighted and sincere smile. "How nice! I hope to have a kid—I've tried often enough."

"You really want a child?"

"Of course, every woman does. I'd have something *all mine*. No matter what you do: work, make love, even get high—it's something you're sharing. With a baby ... true, poppa puts in a few seconds, but me ... I'd spend a whole nine months making the kid, so he'd be mine. Tell you, nothing in this world as sad as the wail of a baby, or happy as his laughter. Giving birth is about the only thing I ain't done yet, but. . . . Hey, Touie, you against kids?"

"Glance around outside, enough ragged brats in the world. Take the kid's view, what can you—anybody—offer him?" I asked, the conversation making me sad.

"Who expects a sure thing? You're giving him a ticket in the sweepstakes, the rest is up to him—or her. Tell you a secret, Touie, mama didn't want me. That's always been okay with me, I understood—she wasn't married and. . . . Listen: I remember her when I was about two years old, or even younger. She'd come around to the joints where she had me boarded out, play and make a great fuss over me. Second she'd see me, her face lit up like she was wired. Then, after a couple times, I never saw her again. Could be dead by now, or married—got herself another family. But I never had no bad feelings about her—that's the truth. Way I add it, she tried the best she could for me."

"That and a token will get you on the subway."

Janis looked puzzled. "What?"

"A punch line—a bad one," I said, sorry I'd started all this. "Tell me, honest, haven't you ever wished you weren't born?"

"Touie, you're not a well b- man. I was living with some of Ma's poor-ass sisters—a big deal because my dad was sending money to pay for me every month. He was an oil rigger, what they call a 'roughneck' in the oil fields. Legally, he didn't have to pay for my keep, but he did, which made me feel great. When I was about 12, he suddenly come to see me. Big as you are, wild as could be. He started coming around every couple of months, buy me clothes, take me out.

Why Dad once cleaned out a bar when some jerk objected to him giving me a beer. Smart man, too. Not educated—he couldn't write his name good—but smart in his own way. Once he told me, 'Jan, you're only on this little piece of dirt a couple of years, live 'em all, full as you can. Don't die thinking about what you've missed.' What do you think of that, Touie?" she drawled.

"He's quite a philosopher," I said, politely.

Janis nodded eagerly. "That he was. Another time, when he was driving me around in a car he'd turned up in, a cop stopped him. A snotty little cop. Dad paid him off—his license wasn't. So when I asked why he didn't smack the cop, he rubbed my hair—his was blonde as mine, almost, Mama had dark hair—told me 'Jan, you want to get along in this world, remember to know when to kiss ass as well as when to kick it.' Never forget that. . . ."

"Where's he now?" I asked, wondering why it took so long to ready her room.

"I heard he was killed in an oil fire. I couldn't look into it much—he had a family . . . you know. The money he was sending every month stopped—that's when I heard he was killed. I had a run-in with this bitchy old aunt I was living with, an' run off . . ."

There was a knock on the door. The desk clerk—minus his tux—announced the room was ready. I tipped him six *pesos* and carried Janis' bag into the other room. I told her to get a good night's sleep as she was trying the bed.

Returning to my room, I brushed off the bed, thankful "white womanhood" hadn't been a problem after all. As I was unbuttoning my shirt, Janis opened the door. "Touie, no bath in my room and I'm a mess. Can I use yours?"

"Sure."

She locked the bathroom door and I smoked a pipe, feeling as though I was finally working on the case, damn lucky stumbling on Cuzo's ex-gal. . . .

The bathroom door opened. Janis stood there, nude, shivering a little—actually looking shy and helpless. Staring

at her thin body, I thought only of Fran's strong shoulders and fine hips . . . as my eyes casually ran over all of Janis' pitiful curves. "Spare a robe?" she drawled, slipping me the slack grin of a lush.

Taking her hand, I threw her on the bed. "Get under the covers!"

"Why, of course." She giggled.

"I'm locking you in here, sleeping in your room. Get some shut-eye, we've a lot of work tomorrow."

"Boy, you're crazy, missing some fine stuff." She turned her head toward the wall.

Locking the door, I went to 'her' room and relit my pipe. Her suitcase held a small purse—I found her tourist visa. The name really was Janis Kent.

When I finished the pipe, I went next door—Janet was under the covers and snoring—open mouth, giving the odd face a tragic touch. I brought her bag in, washed up, took my gun—returned to the other room.

I fell off into a good sleep—wondering if I had a pale skin or Janis a dark one—whether we'd be sleeping in separate beds. . . .?

Chapter 5

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I WAS UP EARLY Monday morning, full of pep. Janis was still asleep, a blanket up to her chin, childishly hugging a pillow. In the morning light, minus any make-up, her face was a sad mixture of youthfulness and crude shadows of dissipation. The blonde hair she was so proud of, forming a soft background for the thin face.

I took a shower and she still slept. It was only 9 a.m. so I went downstairs with her coat and one dress, asked the day shift desk clerk where I could find a one-hour dry cleaner. He took her things, said they'd be back in her room before noon. I asked about doing my laundry, was told it would take a day. The clerk was looking at me oddly—even if he hadn't seen her things, he must have heard about blondie.

There was an air mail from Frances—the letter she'd mentioned over the phone. A tender note—in Fran's direct, bold handwriting, and the letter gave me a big lift. I sent off an air mail card, started to write I was happy at having a kid, but merely wrote how much I missed her.

When I gave the card to the clerk to mail, he said uneasily, "Senor, while it is none of my business . . ."

"That's a fine way to hold it—none of your business!" I snapped. "Just put her room on my bill and forget it." I was going to add we'd slept in separate rooms, but didn't owe him any explanations. I knew damn well if I'd been a pale-skin, he wouldn't have raised an eyebrow.

It was a beautiful morning and I walked around until I found a woman's shop, purchased two stretch panties from a caramel-colored sales chick who would have sent 125th Street whistling. Heading back to the hotel, I suddenly felt I

was being followed. I didn't see anybody shadowing me, although I stopped to examine the street in store windows, went through the routine of turning corners and waiting in doorways. All I saw were obvious tourist couples, plump, and *weak-skinned*, of course. I suppose I was looking for Cuzo, or some of his sallow-puss buddies.

When I opened the door Janis was sitting up in bed, stretching and proving to the world she had small breasts. Deciding to play it cool, I didn't say a word about covering up. Instead, I told her about cleaning her things, gave her the panties.

"Oh, you're a sweetie, Touie," she drawled—the drawl slightly spoiling the bright day. "But these tight panties give me the itch, I'll exchange them later. Thanks for thinking of my hips. Honey, I'm hanging and starved, could you get me a cup of java?"

"I can do better." The ancient wall phone worked—to my surprise—and I ordered two breakfasts. Janis called out, "I'm awful thirsty and you know about the water here—give me a shot of whiskey?"

"Early in the day for that."

"Who drinks by the clock?" she wisecracked, almost proudly.

I ordered a whiskey but the desk clerk didn't quite understand the word. "Hard stuff, booze, rye, Scotch . . . or a beer," I explained.

Jumping out of bed, Janis grabbed the phone, told him in Spanish. With 15 or 20 pounds spread in the right places, she'd have a neat figure. Hanging up, she spun around, as if modeling, gave me a kind of silly pout when I didn't reach for her, walked to the bathroom with much hip-swaying. "I have to tinkle."

"Tinkle?" I repeated, then sat down and laughed. I suddenly liked Janis very much, drawl and all, although not in the way she assumed. Coming out of the bathroom, she did a bump for my enjoyment. I took the shirt I'd worn yesterday off the chair, tossed it at her. I didn't have enough shirts with

me to offer her a clean one. "Okay, Janis, I haven't any doubts left about you're being a woman. Now put this on, until your clothes are returned."

Slipping on my shirt she looked like a caricature of the barbershop pin-up: the shirt was so large it didn't cover what it should have.

Lighting a cigarette, she sat on the bed, swinging her legs. "Honey, you . . ."

"Touie is the name."

She stuck her very pink tongue at me. "What's in a name, honey? What I was going to say, honey-Touie, you have the trait I go for most in a john—you ain't cheap. Breakfast in bed, now that's doing it up brown."

I wondered if she was digging me with the 'brown' bit. "Didn't you and Jose Cuzo eat in bed?"

"You kidding, that slob don't let one *peso* slip through his hot little fingers. Some Sundays, like yesterday, his take is about ten grand—American folding green, not *pesos*! And every coin sticks to his tight hands!"

It wasn't going to be necessary to 'pump' Janis, she bubbled with information. "For that kind of dough I'd stick bulls myself. Does the matador keep all this quiet money himself, or is he pieced-off by a mob, like pugs in the States?"

"I don't know, honey—he never talked much. Stingy with words, too. Most of these matadors travel with a gang of handlers and yes-men. Joey has a couple of creeps, but nobody on steady salary. Handles his equipment himself, cleaning his swords—to save a few lousy pesos."

"Yesterday I saw him taking home some of the bull for hamburgers."

Janis shook her blonde hair. "That's bunk. He don't eat any part of the bull."

"The meat too tough for him?"

"I never seen him eat any meat. That greaser's some kind of food nut, always making juices out of herbs and grass. He eats more fruit than a cage of monkeys. But it works for

him, he's so hard-all-over—ain't no part of his body you couldn't scratch a match on. The bum is so damn cheap he won't let any of his buddies touch the bull meat, either. Insists on burning it himself and . . .”

There was a knock on the door. I glanced at Janis: she didn't make any move to cover herself. I called out: come in. A young bellhop wheeled in a table with our breakfast. The lobby clerk had acted so upset over Janis but his kid—who hadn't begun to shave—never blinked an eye at her sitting half-nude in my shirt. This kid . . . would *my* kid be wheeling in somebody's breakfast fifteen years from now?

Janis put the hooker of whiskey down while I signed the tab, gave the boy some pesos. For several minutes we ate in silence—I was still hungry when I finished the light breakfast. Lighting my pipe, I got back to work, asking, “What's the point of Cuzo bringing home the bull bacon if he only burns it? Why burn it?”

“Takes it home for publicity. Why he burns it. . . ? Who knows? Indians are superstitious clowns and . . .”

I was going to bawl Janis out for that, nor had I forgotten the “greaser” crack. I had a clear idea of what she'd call me to somebody else. But I let her talk on—wasn't paying her to learn manners and common sense.

“ . . . Joey likes a good time, believe me, especially a chance to show off. Likes to make the rounds of the bars, nodding at the people. But after every fight the first thing he does is burn the meat he's cut from the bull. Sits there alone, crouching on his heels, staring at the burning meat, slowly fanning the smoke. Won't stand for nobody kidding about it, either. He goes to church, but if you ask me—the burning meat is a sacrifice, part of some heathen religion.”

“Does he say anything, like a prayer, while fanning the smoke?”

“I don't know, he's alone when he does this. I'm glad to be rid of him, gave me the jitters. He's like a savage, except for the way he socks his dough away. Never gambles. Sometimes he'll buy drinks—if he has to—but don't touch booze himself

... except for a beer. Oh—he'll spend big loot, too, but only on Joey. Has more clothes than a haberdashery, a fast English roadster, pilots his own plane. Flew me to Matilla once."

"Where's that?"

"A drag spot way below Acapulco. Like really nothing there but a couple of crummy sun-dried mud huts. Landed right on the edge of the beach, scared the living sugar out of me—I thought he'd flipped and was coming down in the ocean. The weirdie insisted we ... eh ... make love on the wet beach, with the damn waves licking at us. Crazy stud. I swallowed so much salt water I was sick. He never took me there again. Mostly he flies alone."

"When he hasn't hot drawers, what's he do down there?"

"Honey, there ain't much you *can* do in Matilla. After our salty romance, Joey told me to stay in the plane and walked way on down the beach, out of sight. Tell you, I was plenty scared on that wild beach, nervous from the salt water I'd swallowed. He returned in about a half hour, and we took off. I know he had a fat money belt under his shirt—it was empty when he returned.

"Did he buy anything?"

"He was empty-handed."

I puffed on my pipe, turning all this info over for a moment—thinking mostly how lucky I'd been to find Janis. She knew ...

"Honey, can I have another drink?"

"Tonight. When your clothes come back, we're going out, do some ... work."

"You know what ole Napoleon said, a car can't run on an empty tank."

"Nor when your carburator is flooded, either—that's a direct quote from the Duke of Wellington. Janis, this religious kick Cuzo is on—does he ever play with snakes?"

"You kidding? He's a big boy."

"Damn it, stop it! In my research for the article I'm doing—I read Mexico City is built on the remains of Tenochtitlan, the old Aztec capital, and the Aztecs used to worship snakes.

Perhaps *El Indio* is the last of the Aztecs?" I'd read the thing about Tenochtitlan in an air line travel folder.

"Touie, I never saw him play with any, and if he did, wouldn't be around me. I don't mix with snakes, period. Although I'm always running into the two-legged kind. Present company not counted." Janis presented me with a dazzling smile: some of her back teeth were missing.

I went off on a new tack. "The girls really go for him?"

"Has to push them out of the way." Janis crushed her cigarette on the edge of the ash tray, but the butt fell to the floor. We both watched it start burning the old carpet. As I moved, she suddenly picked it up, placed it in the tray. "I once set a chair afire, like this. I need a drink to steady my nerves."

"I'll phone down for more orange juice."

She called me a vicious name, with a giggle.

I told her, "Comes lunch, I'll buy you a couple of cocktails. Among Cuzo's harem, were you the only American babe? I mean, you ever see, or hear him talk about an American woman named Grace? Good figure, sandy hair, looks . . .?"

"A colored gal?"

"No. She looks like a teenager but isn't, said to be wealthy?"

"If she has loot, what would she be hanging around him for?" Janis asked, sending a troubled look my way. "Touie, what's with you? You look like a dick—although I never heard of no colored detectives. I know you're packing a rod, and all you talk about is Joey. Are you a badge?"

"Told you I'm a writer—you can't write about Mexico without mentioning the bull ring and Cuzo's the hottest matador here," I said cautiously. "I always go armed. My . . . research often takes me to strange places."

"Cops make me nervous," Janis said, scratching her puny breast. "This Grace, she your chick?"

"No. Fellow back in New York said he knew her, and that she was supposed to be sweet on some matador down here. Jose ever mention anybody named Grace?" I asked, again.

"Hard to say, he isn't a talker. And I only been in his stable for the last couple weeks. He always has lots of female hustlers around. Bounced me for some local pig—guess he don't believe the old saying about nearer the bone the sweeter the meat—this new gal is a fat bimbo." Janis yawned, fell back on the bed. "Think I'll get some shut-eye . . . until my clothes come. Ain't nothing else to do."

I got to my feet. "I'll exchange the panties. What's your size?"

That was a wrong question. Starting to pull up my shirt, she said, "Judge for yourself . . ."

"Now, come on!" I growled. "What size do I ask for?"

"So, you're not such a cool cat, after all," Janis said, pleased. "Get me a 5—lacy ones. I like teasing you, Touie."

I gave her a mock bow as I shut the door, thinking a 1000 miles north of here; she'd scream blue murder if I happened to see her in bed.

The clerk at the desk still gave me troubled eyes as I left the lobby. I wanted him to make a call for me, but didn't bother asking him. Glancing around the sunny street, I again had the feeling I was being watched. In a way I was glad I was getting some action—had already wasted two days of my 'vacation.' In a bar I dialed Grace's home. A female voice—probably Ophelia's—gushed Spanish at me, then said, "No here—school, school," when I asked for Grace again.

The call could wait. When I entered the lingerie shop, the sales girl with the pretty caramel-smooth face beamed at me. "Ah, senor, I so glad you return. I . . ."

"What's the matter, I forget to pay you?"

"Oh, no, senor. But . . . I tell you this only because you have the color of my grandfather in your face. Not more than five minutes after you go, a large senor come here and say he friend of you, ask what you buy, how you pay."

"What? How I paid?"

"Si, si, he ask if you pay with traveler check. I say cash. He thank me and go away."

"Mexican man?"

"No, a *Norte Americano* who speak good Spanish. A *robusto* senior, big man with very pale skin. Look much like detective I see in movies."

"He was an actor?"

"No, no, but look like what you call . . . private eye, on screen. Tough face, big as you."

I thanked her, wondering what the hell this was all about. I exchanged the panties, paying the difference. As I was leaving, she said, "Senor, it is not for me to speak so, but I do not think this senior was your *amigo*."

"Thanks. Did he ask for me by name?"

"I do not know your name. Say he *amigo* of big . . . dark man who just leave, say you lose something and he helping you. That is all he say."

I thanked her again and walked slowly back toward the hotel, trying to figure this out—it didn't make a bit of sense. An old woman waved lottery tickets in my face. I bought one, taking my time counting my change—studying every white male tourist near me. Most of them were with their wives, cameras hanging from their fat necks like tourist badges. They paid me no mind, of course, and I felt stupid, staring at them like a dummy. When I reached the hotel the desk clerk had a special delivery airmail from Ted. Handing it to me, he said, "Senor Moore, maybe I should not be saying this, but we do not wish trouble in the hotel, you understand, so . . ."

"Cut it! I rented a room for my secretary last night, what's there to understand?" I asked, opening the letter. It was a scrimpy background file on Grace. The fact she was 39 years old, the colleges she'd attended, home town, and other minor stuff. Ted wrote she'd been married to a society playboy named Perry Burns—a war romance—when she was 22. Burns was a fifth-rate tennis bum, and there had been a messy divorce 3 years later, charges and counter-charges of adultery, Grace had settled an 'undisclosed sum' on Burns. She had returned to college for her masters, worked with a UN medical unit in the Middle East for several years, came

to Mexico and married Juan Lupe-Varon when she was 31. Ted wrote he was still looking into her credit rating, would write again.

Shoving the letter in my pocket, I glanced at the clerk, who had politely been waiting for me to finish reading. "Did Miss Kent's things come back from the cleaners?"

"Soon, señor. I do not speak of Miss Kent, Señor Moore, but of a man who came here early this morning and asked if you were still at the hotel. I . . ."

"A burly man, a white American, speaking Spanish?" I cut in.

"Ah, si, si, that is the man. You know him?"

"What did he want?"

"I do not know. He ask if there was a colored North American here. At first I think he was tourist, he spoke English—like your secretary—soft English, but . . ."

"With a drawl?" Perhaps Janis' daddy wasn't dead.

"I think that is how you call it. But when he asked how long you had been here, if you cashed many checks . . . I tell him I can not give out such information. He become very nasty—in Spanish. I have sure feeling this man is from your police. I am not asking you to move, señor, but please, we do not want any scandals in the hotel. We have good name and . . ."

"Don't worry, I'm not in trouble with the police, or anybody else—far as I know. Did he say he was going to return?"

"No, sir. He call me . . . never mind what he call me. He threaten to punch my nose, then he go away—angry."

I took out a five-dollar bill. "Listen, if this man ever returns, talk to him, stall him, and call my room. I don't know who he is, but I want to find out."

"I will do my best," he said, casually pocketing the money. "I hesitate to speak to you, but I read faces, and you have a honest one."

"Thanks. One more thing, please call Mrs. Lupe-Varon at the University, for me, now."

While it was possible Janis' father had followed her to Cuzo's hotel, and then here—I doubted it. He certainly wouldn't be interested in how I'd paid for the panties, if I'd cashed any checks.

The clerk handed me the phone and Grace's cool voice asked, "Toussiant, anything come up? They called me from a class to . . ."

"Did you hire another investigator from the States to work on this case? Or, to check on my expense account?"

"Of course not. I don't mind you phoning me here, but only if it's important. I'm in the midst of a lecture on . . ."

"I'm in the midst of being followed by some big clown who seems to be checking on what I spend."

"How odd. Really, I know nothing about it. Could your home office be responsible for this?" There was a slight note of worry in her voice.

"No. Forget it, for now. Grace, can you go through your husband's files, get me some data on C . . . the party we're both interested in? Where he was born, his relatives, places he's lived, wives, etc. I'd check the newspaper offices myself, but I can't read Spanish."

"Juan kept a detailed file on the Indian. Have you learned anything?"

"Only that he doesn't eat meat, as your husband thought. When can I have the files?"

"I'll look it up when I go home for the *siesta* . . ."

"I'll be at your house by one."

"I don't like to lose my afternoon nap. I'm driving downtown to do some shopping. I'll be at your hotel, about 3.15."

"There's a real bit of old Mexico near the hotel called the Hollywood Cafe. I'll be waiting for you there." I didn't want Janis meeting Grace.

"All right. Toussiant, are you a drinking man?" The slight worried tone was back in her voice.

"Nope. Don't worry, I never put my lushing on a client's expense pad."

"*Touche*. See you at 3.15, then."

I went upstairs to ask Janis more about her father. She was still in bed, an empty fifth of Scotch on the floor. I let her sleep—there wasn't much else I could do. I sat by the window for a while, smoking my pipe to kill the whiskey stink in the hot room. A wacky blonde who'd already taken too many turns down the wrong roads. And she longed to have children! Tomorrow, I'd probably pay her off, give her a plane ticket for the States.

I tried to think if Ted's rundown on Grace had anything to do with the case. Of course if I could find the guy tailing me, I might have all the answers I'd need to . . .

I was so jittery I jumped at the knock on the door. It was the bellhop with Janis' clothes. Pointing at the empty bottle, I told him, "Take this out. Don't bring her any more liquor. You understand?"

"Si, senor. She call for bottle when you go. I have no instructions not to bring."

"Okay, you have instructions now," I said, handing him a 5 peso tip. "No matter what she says—no drinks."

Hanging up her coat and dress, I left a note telling Janis to wait for me—a silly gesture; she'd be out cold for hours. Leaving the hotel I mailed a few cards to the boys in the P.O., bought a silver and jade bracelet for Fran. Then I crossed the street to a large department store, took a plant inside, near the window, watching the store I'd come out of—to see if my white shadow came around asking questions.

He was a pro; I never saw him. Having a headache, I dropped into the first non-tourist-looking restaurant I passed. The waiter spoke no English and no matter what I pointed to on the hand-written menu, he let go a flood of Spanish as he shook his head at the wall clock—I probably had the supper menu. Finally I asked, "Ham and eggs?" His carefully shaved line-moustache bent in a smile. Calling, "Si! Si!" over his shoulder he dashed into the kitchen. I had a bottle of beer with the meal and felt a little better.

Once I saw a large, dumpy, white face peering into the

window, but when I rushed out of the restaurant, the street was empty except for a few Mexican students with their books.

I had to find my tail, so I walked around in the hot sun like an idiot, purposely strolling through parks which were deserted in the mid-day heat. Once I thought I saw Frank Smith turning a corner, but ran up to see a swarthy-skinned Mexican in worn clothes going down the street. By 2.30 I was tired and sweaty. I bought a couple of T-shirts, some socks, and an expensive Cuban white sport shirt, waited in vain down the street for my shadow to visit the shop—big dark me sticking out like that sore thumb on the quiet street.

I went back to my hotel. Janis was still feeling no pain. I showered and shaved, the Cuban shirt very cool to the skin and neatly covering my gun—what the shirts were originally designed for. The desk clerk told me my white opposite hadn't returned.

Standing inside the door of the hotel, I examined the street as I lit my pipe, finally walked down to the Hollywood Cafe. I sat in a booth, sipping *Tehuacan*, a bottled mineral water tasting like so much nothing.

Minutes later Grace walked in, very chic in a light-blue suit which nicely set off her cropped sandy hair. But wearing the same boatneck blouse she'd worn before. I wondered why it took Ted so long to get a line on her financial status.

As we sat down and she ordered a beer, Grace said, "My, but you look very—manly—in that lovely sport shirt. Did you learn any more about whoever is following you, Toussiant?"

"Nothing except he knows his business. You bring the data on *El Indio*? I saw him in action yesterday—quite a lad."

Grace took a fancy tooled-leather notebook from her purse. "I've made a digest of Juan's notes," she said, reading from the little notebook. "Nobody knows exactly where Cuzo was born, his birthdate, or if he has any relatives. That's not unusual, if you remember Mexico is still a semi-illiterate

country, and certainly twenty or more years ago few birth records were kept in most villages. Also proves Jose wasn't born in any of the larger cities—if that's of any value to you. Juan's files show Cuzo was a diving boy in Acapulco for a short time when he was about 13. Before that he worked as a kind of handyman and gardener—although he must have been a mere child—for a Spanish family named Zayas, who lived outside a tiny coastal fishing village called Matilla. No record of Cuzo having any formal education, nor of his ever being married, or serving in the army. The . . .”

“Could the reason he doesn't fight in Spain be—he can't get a passport, since he doesn't have a birth certificate?” I cut in.

“I don't know,” Grace said. “First, the fact Juan couldn't find where *El Indio* was born, doesn't mean Cuzo hasn't a birth certificate. I'm fairly certain he's a Mexican citizen—in the last election I recall a picture of him at the polls. Also, he travels to the States, so he must have papers of some kind. The rest of Juan's files contain all of Jose's various fights, some critical notes about Cuzo's techniques in the ring.”

“Have you a list of his pals, close friends?”

Grace smiled at me. “Juan always told me Cuzo hadn't any friends—he didn't trust anybody. He's said to be tight with his money, which wouldn't make him popular with the professional bull ring set. That's all the notes. Of any help, Toussiant?”

“Maybe. In this business you never know from what side a break may come, so I try to hit as many angles as possible. I think I'll go down to Acapulco tomorrow, see what I can dig up around there.”

“I have my own plane, let me fly you down,” Grace said. “Don't look so startled, or is that fear on your big face? I have over a 1000 hours in the air.”

“Thanks, but . . . I'm not going alone.”

Grace arched her thin eyebrows. “Oh. I hope she isn't a blonde?”

"Why?"

"It's simply that in my mind I thought of you being rather comfortable in Mexico where most people are . . . slightly dark of skin. They say once a Negro man steps outside the USA he starts chasing white women. Of course that could be due to a shortage of colored women in—say—Europe. But I hope you're not running true to type."

"What type? Listen, my father would have called all these light-skinned people here—'crap-colored!' Mexico City isn't much different than New York for me . . . almost," I said, not saying what I wanted. "It so happens I lucked up on one of Cuzo's ex-gals, a very blonde—blonde. She's given me some dope on him, part of which checks with what you've told me. But it's strictly business for me. Why, my wife is pregnant and . . ." I felt as stupid as I sounded.

Grace laughed. "Toussiant, you're priceless."

"Damnit, stop patronizing me!" I said, my mind warning me not to talk myself out of a job.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. This your first child?"

"Yes, all Negroes don't have large families!" I added curtly. She looked a trifle hurt—it would be terribly stupid of me to hurt a hundred bucks a day. To change the subject I said, "Didn't mean to be abrupt with you, Grace. Do you have any children?"

"Me? Oh, no—I see little need to add to the already overpopulated world."

"Yeah." I almost added, "Me, neither."

"Juan never wanted children, we understood each other perfectly—a child would interfere with my work. Frankly, in most cases having kids is a form of escape, like drink. A woman says, 'I'm pregnant, therefore I can't be so bothered with the problems of the world.' One thing I've learned about life, don't let yourself be bogged down with responsibilities—children, even too many possessions. I try to live as uncomplicated a life as possible."

"Aren't you bogged down in your snake studies?"

"Oh, no, I do that by choice—it's my work in life. Are you having a baby by choice, Toussiant?"

"No, that is, I didn't plan on it," I said, wanting to change the subject again. "I have a hunch this clown tailing me hasn't any connection with Cuzo. Are you in any other kind of difficulty, Grace? For an instance—having any trouble with your first husband?"

Her eyes turned hard with surprise. "How did you know I was married before?"

"Is it a secret? It speeds up a case to get what information we can on all the people involved, before we start. My tail seems to be a Stateside badge, the kind of a guy your ex-hubby would hire if . . ."

"This is ridiculous! I haven't seen or heard from Perry—my first husband—in over a dozen years. He hasn't any claim on me, legal or emotional. My marriage to him was a merry-go-round of aggravation, of all the petty nuisances of our false society. It took me several years to realize the horrible time swindle it was, but once I paid . . . settled with Perry . . . and returned to my work, I've been happy ever since. Up to Juan's death."

"Are you on the brink of some important scientific discovery?"

She smiled. "Every scientific discovery is important. Without the knowledge that 2 and 2 makes 4, man would have never been able to put a rocket into space. My work is more than merely a job to me—it's my religion. I'm searching for the true meaning of . . . humanity."

"In snakes?"

"Yes. In dealing with the so-called symbol of 'evil'—the snake—I've found there isn't any such thing, *per se*, as pure evil. Now I want to learn what's on the other side of 'good.' I literally want to see the face of God."

"You serious?"

"Damn you, who's the patronizing one now? Stop staring at me as if I'm raving. As a trained scientist I don't believe the order of our existence—and there's obviously a pattern to

it—can entirely be the result of chance. Therefore, if there is a Supreme Being or Force behind everything, I want to see Him or Her—literally see!”

My face must have reflected my thoughts—that I might be working for a crack-pot—for Grace suddenly smiled, reached over the table and patted my hand. “But don’t you worry about that. I’ll fly you both down to Acapulco—I often go there to swim.”

“I’m not sure it would be wise for you to be seen with one of the Indian’s gals. He may not know I’m working for you.”

“Mexico City in one aspect is very much like a small town: everybody seems to know everybody else’s business. See those two sharply dressed characters at the bar?”

Turning, as if looking for the waiter, I glanced at two little guys in linen suits working on beers. “What about ’em?”

“Part of Jose’s entourage. The one with the brushed grey hair handles most of his publicity. Certainly Cuzo is aware, by now, you’re working for me. I haven’t any classes until Thursday—I’d love a few days on the Acapulco beach.”

“Okay. What time tomorrow . . .?”

“If I drive by your hotel within an hour, can you be ready? Waiting in the lobby—with your baggage?” There was the proper sarcastic underscoring of the word baggage.

“I’ll get started now,” I said, calling for the check. It would take an hour to sober Janis up. I wanted her along—she was the only thing I had going for me on the case—so far.

Janis was amazing: if she took on a quick load, she straightened up even faster. A cold shower, a few cups of coffee, and she was her usual running-off-at-the-mouth self. When I said I was buying her a plane ticket back to the States in a day, Janis took it in her stride. When I added I had some work to do in Acapulco first, she merely started packing her few belongings. There’s a great deal to be said for a babe agreeable to anything a guy wants.

Riding the elevator to the lobby, I asked, “Did you tell me your father was dead?”

"Died a long time ago. What made you ask that?"

"I don't know—nothing. Merely making conversation."

"Well, never make no sad conversation when I'm hung-over, please!"

Checking out, I told the desk clerk I was going to Taxco, on the tourist swing, and to hold my mail. He said he hoped I wasn't leaving as a result of what he'd told me about the man inquiring for me.

Waiting in the lobby, coat and dress clean, blonde hair combed into a long pony-tail, Janis looked very feminine. Grace drove up toggled out in dungarees and an old sweat-shirt—causing plenty of stares. She and Janis were a pair of opposites. When I introduced them they were so damn cordial to each other, you'd almost think they were jealous.

There was far too much traffic going to the airport for me to tell if we were being followed. Parking her car, Grace walked us to a twin-engined Beechcraft and we sat in the cockpit while she went to check with the control tower. Janis asked, "This tight-pants broad the babe you were asking me about?"

"Could be. She's helping me with my . . . story."

"No matter how good she takes care of herself, she ain't no kid. And I never seen her at the hotel or . . ." Janis pointed toward a sleek, red-tailed, single motor plane warming up several hundred yards away, whispered, "Hey, there's Joey's plane."

Joey didn't seem to be around anyplace. After a few minutes a fat mechanic strolled over, listened to the steady roar of the engine for a moment, finally shut it off. When Grace climbed into our cockpit, pointing toward the red-tailed plane I told her, "That belongs to the famous matador, *El Indio*."

"I know—seems ready to take-off."

Grace was the expert pilot I expected her to be and I relaxed, watching the barren and lush countryside below us. Some 70 or 80 minutes later, as twilight was starting to dim the sky, we were over the neon lights of Acapulco, waves

breaking in slow rolls of phosphorescent flashes along the beaches, fancy homes and hotels hanging from cliffs inside the horseshoe-shaped harbor. It reminded me of Monte Carlo, the rocky coast of the Riviera. Grace took us on a quick sight-seeing circle of the harbor and sea before bringing her plane in for an effortless landing. Without a word a cigar-chewing mechanic took over the plane and a taxi was waiting to drive us the 8 miles into town.

She even had three rooms reserved in a beach pension, a comfortable house of about 20 rooms near Los Hornos Beach, the refreshing salty tang of the ocean in every breath of air. Except for a very old man, who looked British and kept to himself all the time, we were the only guests. The help included the usual Indian maids, a boy of about 11 called Bernardo, and a stout woman who owned and/or managed the pension. They all thought a great deal of Grace: obviously an old client.

Janis kept glancing around as though she was accustomed to better places, asking where the bar was. I told her to shut up and take it easy. While Bernardo was taking our bags upstairs, I sent Fran an airmail card to let her know where I was. It was the only postal card they had—a colorful picture of the boys diving from the cliffs—and added to the impression I was on a vacation.

When Bernardo showed me my room, he hung around, asking in good English if I *really* wanted to see some night life? His skin was brown enough to make him look like a kid at the 135th Street Y, although his jet-black hair was soft and straight—and something he devoted much time to brushing. His clothes represented things he'd picked up from various guests—worn tweed slacks so old they still had buttons on the fly, an outrageous red vest with purple buttons—carefully cut down to fit the boy, new sneakers, and a much-patched white silk sport shirt. Bernardo was the type of kid spoiled by too many tourists until he *has* to grow up a hustler.

When I asked if he could get my dirty shirts done by

tomorrow night, he assured me he could, and as he took the laundry, held his little hand next to mine, comparing our shades of brown. Smith had told me the folks down here had some African in them, like me.

Grace came to my room, asked if I wanted to see the city before supper. Sniffing the salty air, I told her I'd rather get a swim in, after the heat of Mexico City. She said she was a skin-diving fan.

Janis wasn't for night swimming, or any kind of water, said she would give her hang-over some sleep until we returned. From someplace in the pension Grace brought out aqua-lungs, fins, masks, and even two heavy, black rubber suits. I managed to wiggle into mine as Bernardo perched on the foot of my bed, asking if I had ever been a 'box-ar,' how many inches I was over six feet, could I please show him how to gain muscle—and other silly questions. Or, perhaps not so silly for an 11-year-old.

The rubber suit wasn't new and as I struggled to put it on, I wondered who had used it before—a guy my size, at least. Feeling like a space man, I joined Grace in the lobby—the skin-tight rubber showing more fleshy curves than I suspected she owned. I carried both aqua-lungs as we crossed the sand facing the pension to the Pacific. The beach was empty and dirty with papers and trash. Usually these tourist 'meccas' have spotless sand. Glancing at Grace in the dim light, I had to grin—in dark suits we looked like a couple of club-members.

I'd skin-dived before, although never with a complete outfit, while Grace turned out to be an expert at it—naturally. We horsed about, not going down more than 10 feet, the water dark and creepy at night. It was hardly my idea of a swim—the damn rubber suit made me sweat.

After maybe 15 minutes, Grace motioned toward the gauge on my tank: time to surface. We were about a 100 yards off-shore and on our backs—so the Pacific would help support the weight of the tanks. Fins working like lazy propellers, we kicked towards the beach. The moon was out

strong now, and the sky filling with stars. I kept thinking of that old punch line "... And you're getting paid for this, too?"

Passing the breakers, we pushed the masks up on our faces, walked in. I was gazing up at the hotels, blazing like Christmas tree lights, on the cliffs, wondering if Fran and I would ever make it to a swank resort—when I felt a light tap on my gut. In the pale moonlight I saw a sliver of cotton-tipped wood sticking to my suit.

"What's this, sanitary mosquitos?" I asked Grace, pointing to the sliver of wood and cotton.

Wide-eyed, she suddenly pushed me with both hands. I stumbled backwards, then fell into the ocean as Grace dived in beside me. I sat up, head and shoulders above the water, in time to take a small wave in my big mouth. Spitting salt water, I said, "Practical jokes are ..."

"Did it pierce your suit?" she asked, only her head above the water, staring intently toward the beach. There wasn't any joking tone in her hard voice.

"Did *what* pierce my suit?"

"The ... the thing with the cotton tip?"

"I don't feel anything," I said, running my hand over my rubber-covered gut. The waves had washed the sliver away.

"Don't touch it!"

"It's gone. What's the matter?"

Still staring at the dark, sandy beach, Grace said, "It couldn't have cut the suit—if it had pierced your skin you'd be dead by now. While I've never actually seen one—outside of textbook illustrations—Toussiant, I'm fairly certain that was a poisonous dart from a blow gun!"

Chapter 6

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CROUCHING ON THE sandy bottom of the harbor, only our heads above water—I felt as if I was being ribbed. The ‘dart’ could have been a harmless hunk of trash—cotton on a stick to swab out your ears—floating around. Although I did have a distinct feeling of having been *hit* by it. Or, had a wave merely washed it against my stomach?

Another thought: assuming it was a poison dart—I couldn’t recall if I’d been directly facing the beach at the time . . . so busy rubbernecking the hotel lights on the cliff . . . I wasn’t certain it had come *from* the beach. Grace, walking at my side and a little in back of me, could have shot the dart. While I only had a vague idea what a blow gun looked like, it probably wouldn’t be difficult to conceal one in her suit, then let it float away on the dark water after firing the dart. Hell, there might also be another skin-diver around, a human sub surfacing to fire his dart.

Nothing added. While I didn’t have any reason to suspect Grace—nor completely trust her, either . . . I had suggested swimming and she had brought out the rubber suit which had saved my life—if there actually had been a dart. And wouldn’t the water have dissolved any poison? But then I’d been out of the water—at least from the hips up, when I was hit.

A blow gun! The case was going from crazy to utterly nuts.

“Too bad we brought everything except spear guns,” I said, as a couple of tiny crabs inspected my heel. “We can’t sit out here all night. Let me dash ashore and . . .”

The pale light of the moon gently hit Grace’s face; she

was either a fine actress or really frightened. "Talk sense, Toussiant. A blow gun is effective at 300 feet—somebody can be lying flat on the sand, waiting, and you—we—wouldn't have a chance. Should be another 5 to 8 minutes of air in our tanks: let's submerge and swim parallel to the beach . . . whoever is waiting for us will have no idea as to the direction we're heading. Or we can part and . . ."

"We'll submerge but remain right here," I said, wanting to keep Grace in sight. "If there is a blow gun hood on the beach, he figures we'll swim away—start looking for us . . . elsewhere."

Putting our masks back on, opening the tank valves, we sat on the sand in about five feet of water, the filtered moonlight making us a couple of living nightmares. The more I thought about it, the more fantastic the whole scene became—unless the alleged dart was meant for Grace, what would be the point in knocking me off? I certainly hadn't found anything on the case. And why a dart? A shot fired from the empty beach would be easier—with the waves and air acting as a giant silencer.

Grace pointed at the valve needle on her lung. I took her arm and we crawled along the bottom—frightening hell out of a few fish—until we reached the beach. We lay flat on our stomachs at the water's edge, exhausted waves lapping us with a soothing motion. The beach looked the same in the tricky moonlight—dirty and empty. She unhooked her tanks, then we stood up, raced across the sand to the house.

Bernardo was waiting at the door, sneaking a smoke. The run had winded Grace and she went directly to her room. I stayed with the kid, getting my breath back, watching the beach. Bernardo asked if we had enjoyed the swim and could he use the lungs some day?

"Anybody come asking for us—while we were swimming?"

"No one, *senor*. Are you expecting company?"

"I don't really know," I said, going upstairs. I looked in on Janis: she was in her favorite position, in bed, wearing

only her bra and panties—reading the *News*, an English language paper published in Mexico—and listening to some bad radio jazz. She gasped when she saw me. “You sure look like something in those rubber pajamas. Where did you park the flying saucer?”

“You go out to buy the newspaper?”

“Naw, it’s an old copy they had around. The water wet?”

Telling Janis to wash up, we’d eat soon, I went back to my room and peeled off the suit. The room made me uneasy and I found myself listening for the hiss of a snake, some movement, in the dark corners. I couldn’t find any hole in the rubber, but it would be almost impossible to see a pin prick.

Dressing, I checked my gun, then went downstairs and walked around the house. Even though I’d now decided the ‘dart’ had merely been a piece of garbage which had floated against me, I cased the outside of our rooms. My window faced a squat tree which a guy could easily climb, perhaps jump into the room—but even from the tree be able to take a shot at me. Janis had the best room, a corner affair with two windows . . . and no nearby trees. Grace faced nothing but the beach, although a drain pipe ran down the wall nearby. I heard steps coming my way. The other guest of the pension, the old man, came walking by wearing a blazer and a silk scarf around his neck in a silly bow. Swinging his arms as he walked, he nodded at me, “Nothing like the pure night air. The sun burns up the oxygen of the day air . . . I live on the air of night. Take a deep breath, from the pit of your stomach, sir.”

“I’ll do that,” I told this bedbug, watching him walk away with military stiffness.

I went back up to Janis’ room. She was still on the bed. “Come on, get dressed, I’m starved.”

“My tummy has been groaning for chow, too,” she said, jumping off the bed. I could smell the gin halo around her words.

“Damnit, are you crocked?” I asked, looking for the bottle.

"Touie, relax. You know I'm hanging, so I asked that little pest, Bernardo, if there was a loose drink. He brought me one tiny belt you could use for eye-wash, that's all I ..."

"And go blind. Okay, let's dress."

"Honey, I need shoes. Can you advance me a few bucks?"

I gave her a \$20 bill. "Be sure it's for shoes and not for. . ."

"I know, not for snake bite medicine. Now, why are you looking at me so funny for?"

"How come you said that?"

She gave me a blank look, started brushing her blonde claim to fame. "Said what? Snake bite medicine? Haven't you ever heard that corny expression for booze, before?"

"Yeah. Keep off the juice, we have a big day's work waiting for us tomorrow." Crossing the hall, I walked into Grace's room, still wondering if Janis had made a slip of the tongue. Grace was buttoning a slinky, clinging dress—the first new item I'd seen her wear.

"Don't you knock?" She didn't seem too angry. I wasn't sure if I'd knuckled the door or not. Turning her bare back toward me, she patted the silver dress on her trim hips. "Please button me up."

I was going to remind her I wasn't hired as her valet, but didn't. Her skin was cool and firm, and there was an exciting perfume about her. It made me long to be home in bed with Fran, enjoying the velvet firmness of her brown skin.

Leaning out of the window—wondering who Grace was dolling up for—I couldn't reach the drain pipe. The shutters weren't strong enough to support anybody trying to leap from the pipe to the window.

"What are you doing at the window, Toussiant?"

"Taking in the view. Tell me, is this blow gun deal popular in Mexico?" Grace seemed to have recovered from her fright damn fast.

"I never heard of them being used here, even in ancient days. Usually found among primitive tribes of the Australian bush, Africa, South America. An unfortunate symbol of

human mores—the higher the civilization, the more complicated the weapons. Perhaps I was mistaken in the water—could have been a piece of cotton swab going with the tide.”

“That’s what I think, but I’ve been checking our rooms to play it safe. Yours is okay, so is Janis’. There’s a tree outside mine, so I’ll sleep with my shutters closed.”

“Perhaps you’d better sleep with Janis.”

“I told you my relationship with her is that of . . .”

“I know what you told me. You rate a better helper—with her crude face, she’s a dull piece of baggage, really.”

“I hired her because she’s been closer to Cuzo than his tight toreador pants.” I waited to see if this got a rise from Grace.

“Another moron. Are you hungry?”

“Aha.”

“I know a delightful restaurant you’ll love. Now, if you’ll let me finish a few feminine chores I doubt you’d be interested in . . . we can leave.”

“I’ll be downstairs.” Was she digging me in return for what I’d said about Janis and the Indian?

Bernardo was behind the desk, sharpening pencils. “Did the blonde lady, Miss Kent, go down to the beach, looking for us?” I asked.

“She was in her room all the time, senior. I brought her a paper and . . .”

“Perhaps she went out when you left the pension?”

“What means ‘per-hops?’ Ah, is like ‘maybe,’ no? But I never leave the hotel. I bring her newspaper and then drink to . . .”

“Bernardo, no matter what Miss Kent says, don’t bring her any more drinks, or bottles. Understand?”

He nodded gravely. “I know, she what you call a ‘lush-puppy.’”

He said it so solemnly, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “You sharpening pencils for school?”

He looked astonished. “School? I am done with that, two years ago. Now I am man and . . .”

Grace and Janis came down together, Janis admiring Grace's silver gown. Grace said the restaurant was within walking distance and we hadn't gone a few streets—passing posters with *El Indio's* hard face; he was fighting in Acapulco on Sunday—when the hairs on the back of my fat neck began to stand—we were being followed. There were too many passing people for me to make the tail. But when we reached a street full of brightly lit shops, Janis went into a shoe store while Grace stopped to purchase some silver earrings—I ducked into a smoke shop for pipe cleaners. The shop had several phones facing the window. I sat in a booth for a few minutes, watching the street.

I saw a couple of amateurs at work.

My 'shadow' came up the street like a clumsy hound dog—Frank Smith was a lousy tail. He actually stood in the center of the sidewalk, looking for us. On seeing Janis leave the shoe store, Frank jumped into a doorway, nearly knocking over a passerby, then ran into the shadows of a closed shop.

Janis was the other amateur. Glancing about, she dashed into a liquor store, to come out with as many packages as she had on entering the shop—the shoe box and her purse. Grace joined her a few seconds later and then I came strolling out of the tobacco shop, casually cleaning my pipe and—as I learned later—the worst ham actor there.

Grace took us to La Rue, a fine restaurant above a *jai-alai* court. We ate better French food than I ever had in Nice, while watching the *pelota* being hit across the 100 foot hand-ball court below with bullet speed. This was strictly for the visiting firemen—like most things in Acapulco—as were the prices.

Janis was either over- or under-impressed—she didn't chatter much. But Grace was full of small talk, including a few very corny jokes. I couldn't quite understand why she felt she had to make like a hostess. Grace insisted we try some fancy drinks: gin in a coconut; *Piyi-tequila* and rum served in a whole pineapple. After a few of these fruit salad

highballs, Janis loosened up enough to prudishly object to a mildly sexy joke of Grace's.

I was lost in my own thoughts. What was Frank Smith up to? I'd been disappointed at seeing him—hoped our tail had been the burly snow white of Mexico City. One thing I decided about Frank—I'd settle this humpty-dumpty's hash the moment I took the girls back to the pension.

We left the restaurant at about 11 p.m., walking like stuffed turkeys. Grace had insisted—happily—upon taking the tab. Acting the tourist shill, she took us up to watch young men risk their lives diving from the cliffs by torchlight. We were still being shadowed and I wondered how Frank was enjoying the 130-foot leaps timed to the rushing waves below. The divers reminded me of Cuzo—he'd once risked his neck here for tourist coins. The Indian had come a long way up the money ladder.

Acapulco night life seemed to last all night. But after stopping for a few more coco-loco drinks with their delayed charge—plus the stares of some crooked USA tourists, we were all yawning—and returned to the pension shortly after one. Telling Grace I was going out for a last pipe, I stopped in Janis' room to open her shoe box—there was a quart of something called *pulque* between the new shoes.

"Told you to lay off the sauce," I said, taking the bottle.

Janis thumbed her button nose. "So I tried. I had enough tonight anyway—never can take these goddam sweet drinks."

Locking the bottle in my room, I went out the back door of the pension, hid in the shadows for a few minutes—worrying if there might be snakes in the bushes—as I listened to the pleasant booming of the waves on the beach. As the moon was out strongly, I took my time, moving slowly. Smith was so bad I saw the stub of his cigar shining under a tree like a midget beacon.

He was watching my room. After a while, convinced I'd gone to bed, he started walking—but not up toward the swank hotels on the cliffs: he headed for the 'native section' of the city. Following far behind him, his red cigar tip show-

ing me the way, we turned down many narrow streets until he finally entered a dive of a hotel. Parking myself in a dark shop doorway across the street, I waited—to make certain Smith was in bed when I barged in.

When my wrist watch showed 2.35 a.m. I crossed the street for a showdown with my club member. A jeep came up the street fast—a large white man wearing a dark, conservative suit, jumped out and grabbed my right arm as he drawled, “I gotcha, boy! Gotcha!”

Spinning me around in the approved police manual fashion, he started bending my arm behind my back. I dug my left elbow into his gut—hard—got one foot back of his thick ankle. We both fell backwards, but he was low man on this totem pole. Grunting—his hot breath rushing past my ear, he let go of my arm. Rolling off him, I jumped to my feet, but burly-boy got up faster than I did, clouted me on the side of the head with a wild right. As my noggin’ went off into orbit, I kicked him on the knee, missed his jaw with a left—but it cut his eye . . . and then two cops came out of the jeep and grabbed me. They were slim young tan fellows in snappy uniforms who knew their business: in a second my hands were cuffed behind my back.

“What the hell is this?” I yelled. I heard shutters opening in the dark houses around us.

Burly put his hand to his moon puss, looked at the blood on his palm. Cursing, calling me a black bastard, and a few other choice items—all black—he came in and banged me in my stomach. I gave up all those fruity drinks over him as one of the cops pushed him away, yelling something in Spanish. The other cop hustled me into the back of the jeep. The cop and the dick climbed into the front seat, with the second cop standing on the running board, and off we drove. Of course the wind was against us and the stench of my vomit all over the white detective was something awful.

Minutes later we were in a police station. If I looked messy, coat and shirt torn, my grey opposite was a sickening sight, blood on his puffed face and shirt—along with most of

my French supper. I was frisked, then shoved down onto a bench.

The station house was very neat and modern—as I expected. Acapulco is a playground for the international rich set and where you find wealthy cats—you'll always find an efficient police force.

My arms ached, head was pounding, I felt bruised all over—but I was pleased, this was the break in the case I'd been looking for.

Burly badge said something in Spanish to the man at the desk, who pointed out the washroom. The two cops and the desk sergeant were examining my gun as if they'd never seen one before. "Well, somebody tell me what this is all about?" I called out. "I . . ."

"Shut up," the sergeant said, without looking up as he went through my wallet. He rattled some Spanish into an intercom box and a moment later a police lieutenant came out of a side room, slowly walked over to the desk. They all held a whispered chat, pointing to something in my wallet—probably my gun permit.

This new officer was wearing a custom-made fancy uniform, seemed darker than the others. A handsome, lean joker, with sharp features, carefully oiled and brushed black hair, plus a hairline moustache he devoted daily minutes to. Walking toward me, he said in perfect English, "On your feet, Senor Bane."

I stood up, awkwardly, my wrists burning. "Bane? My name is Toussiant Moore, as you saw on my Tourist Card. Somebody better have a damn good explanation for all. . . ."

"I am Lt. Jorge Leon Tortela. Follow me." He turned: a snappy military-about-face which would have been comical—under other circumstances.

I followed him into a small, but neat office. Sitting behind a polished desk, he lit a cigarette—using a long ivory holder, like a 5th rate movie actor. One of the jeep cops came in, placed my gun, wallet, and an open folder on the desk. For a moment Lt. Tortela stared up at me, then he smiled—of

course he had dazzling white teeth. "Senor, you are the biggest and darkest man I have ever seen."

"That add up to a crime down here?"

"It is possible a mistake has indeed been made. Your Tourist Card is in order, and I see you have a permit for the *pistola*. You say your name is Toussiant Marcus Moore, the permit states you are a private detective. Is that correct?"

"If you'll remove the bracelets, I'll show you my credentials from the Ted Bailey Agency of New York."

"Ah, yes, the irons. Do not attempt any roughhouse here. Is it understood?"

"I was jumped on a dark street, what did you expect me to do but fight? Hell!"

"True. You are now in a police station. No fighting, and no swearing. I do not like strong words," he said, coming from behind his desk, removing the cuffs.

He sat down again as I rubbed my wrists, called out, "Send in Senor Parks." Giving me the flashing smile, he held up my gun permit. "This is your signature?"

"Yes. Can I take my credentials from my pocket?"

"Of course, but do it slowly."

Pulling out the letter Ted had given me, I put it on the desk. Pointing to an old-fashioned heavy chair in front of his desk, Lt. Tortela puffed on his phony holder, told me to sit. He shoved a pen and slip of white paper across his desk. "Be so kind to write your name, so I can check your signature."

I wrote my name—at the very top of the paper—as the white detective, Parks, came in. His cut eye was swollen shut, the piece of tape over it slowly turning pink. The front of his white shirt was wet, where he'd tried to wash off my supper. He still looked a mess. Glaring at me with his good eye, he drawled, "Boy, when I get you over the border you're going to be sorry you were ever born! Your black. . . .!"

"Kindly close your mouth!" Tortela said, busy comparing my signature with a travelers check he had in the folder. Then, looking up at Parks, he added in a hard voice, "This is most embarrassing, a mistake has been made—by you, and

involving my men—the handwriting is not the same!”

“Mistake? Now look here, Lieutenant, he’s a big . . . colored man, ain’t he? I saw him at this hotel in Mexico City, and we collared him going into this house down here where Bane was staying. No mistake, he’s Frank Bane—posing as Frank Smith!”

“Frank Smith?” I repeated.

“You know him?” Lt. Tortela asked.

“I met him at the hotel in Mexico. He took me to the bull fights—the last I saw of Smith. Is he wanted for anything?”

Parks mumbled something in Spanish, but the police officer cut him off with, “Talk English, Senor Parks—we have no secrets from Senor Moore!”

Parks shrugged his heavy shoulders, told me, “A colored guy named Frank Bane has been forging travelers checks—belonging to a Frank Smith . . . cashing them all over Mexico and California. The . . . Lieutenant, you don’t know *them*, I bet they’re working this racket together. . . !”

“Why don’t you shut up and stop boasting of your stupidity?” I growled at Parks, suddenly getting the picture—realizing I was up another blind alley. “All colored people look alike to you. You assumed any Negro living at that hotel in Mexico City had to be Smith—Bane—or whatever his name is.”

“Well if you ain’t in cahoots with Bane, how come you were going into the joint where he rooms, just now?” Parks asked, as if making the winning point in a debate. “If you ain’t . . .”

“What means this ‘cahoots’?” Tortela asked.

“Means they was working hand-in-hand,” Parks told him, with a smug grin on his puffed map. Parks was a crude cement-head; Tortela’s handsome face flushed a darker tan.

I said, “I last saw Smith at the bull fights in Mexico City, on Sunday. Then he suddenly checked out of the hotel, where I’d met him. Next thing I know, I’m being followed around Mexico City. That was probably you.” I nodded at Parks. “I came to Acapulco late this afternoon, *thought* I saw Smith on the street. Being curious as to why he’d left Mexico City so abruptly, I was about to enter his hotel, have a chat—if

it was him—when Parks jumped me—without a word.”

Tortela barked something in Spanish—into the next room. Seconds later I heard the jeep take off. Lighting another cigarette in his ridiculous holder, he told me, “Senor Moore, it is plain a mistake has been made. In the name of the Acapulco police, I apologize. I trust you understand our position.”

“Sure,” I said, smoothing out my torn shirt. I wanted to ask why his police hadn’t approached me first, instead of bully-boy . . . but a private operator doesn’t question the police, not even in his own country.

“The whole affair is an unfortunate error. If you wish to start a civil suit against Senor Parks, the agency he represents, that is your privilege. Of course, if you hadn’t started swinging, the mistake would have been straightened out with no damage. But what is a torn shirt, several punches, among men? I suggest we forget the incident. How long are you staying in Acapulco?”

“I’m not sure, a few days.”

“If you are on a case, you must work through the police department, or you will be in serious difficulty.”

“Of course,” I said, cautiously. “I’m here as a tourist, although I’m also trying to drum up business—for back in the States. We do industrial plant security jobs and there’s an important stockholder living here. An American.” I thought I’d said nothing—very cleverly.

Tortela gave me a pained smile. “Senor Moore, we are *all Americans*—even a school boy knows North America is a large continent. You mean a United States national living here. Must indeed be an important person, gun permits for foreigners are difficult to . . .” His phone cut him off. Tortela listened, rattled off some Spanish, then told Parks, “The street fight naturally alerted the real Senor Bane—he has departed from his hotel. I am putting out an alert; I doubt he will get far.”

Tortela stood up, handed me my things, said he was sorry again. We shook hands.

As I reached the street, Parks came running after me. "Listen, Moore, these Spick cops will never bag Bane—he's a slippery cuss. Make a deal with you: help me find Bane and you get . . . hundred bucks."

"I don't know where he is."

"Now, boy, don't hold me up. Two hundred bucks if you show me where I can put my hands on the bastard."

"Parks, get the hell out of my face before this 'boy' closes your other eye!" I headed down the street, toward the bay. A moment later the police jeep drew along side, the cop at the wheel slipped me a smart salute.

"Senor, I am to drive you to your hotel, if you wish."

Day was already lighting the edges of the ocean horizon when we reached the pension. I thanked the cop. He sat there while I banged on the door of the pension; I finally got the message: tipped him a buck. He thanked me, casually, as if tipping cops was a routine deal, drove off.

One of the maids let me in. I was too bushed to think about Smith, or how I stood on the case now—which was still nowhere. I looked in on Janis, partly covered by a sheet, snoring loudly. Grace's door was locked but I heard her even breathing. In my room I undressed quickly, hit the bed with a sigh. Noticing the tree outside my window, I got up to close the shutters, and taking my gun to bed, slipped into an exhausted sleep.

It seemed I'd barely shut my eyes when there was a knock on the door. My watch said it was 7.46 a.m. with the sun trying to sneak through the shutters. I stumbled heavy-footed toward the door, in my shorts. Grace stood there wearing a robe. "Good morning, Toussiant. Care to swim?"

"Didn't we have enough swimming last night?"

"As I told you, I was being melodramatic last night. Besides, there will be people on the beach now."

I yawned. "Okay to use my hotel underwear for trunks?"

"You look fine to me. I thought you'd want an early start, said you had work to do."

"I have," I told her, going to the john.

Bernardo, sweeping up downstairs, waved to us. Crossing the sand, the beach was far cleaner than last night—either wind or men had carted away most of the paper trash. Grace dropped her robe, revealing a gayly striped tank swim suit. Also a few veins far up on her thighs. I wondered again about her age, but as the saying goes: the more I saw of her the better she looked. The dozen or so people on the beach—all Mexicans, the hotels had their private beaches—also took in Grace's figure—and mine.

The water was a cold shock which brought me awake. We swam for a few minutes, then trotted back to the pension as Grace asked, "Where did you go last night—on the town?"

"Yeah, had a tearing good time," I said, taking her to my room to see my torn shirt. "Found out who was tailing me in Mexico City. Case of mistaken identity, unfortunately."

"After breakfast I'm going to *El Mercado*, the native market. You can buy homespun shirts there. Let me dress, the dip gave me an appetite."

I dressed and went to Janis' room, shook her awake. "We've things to do today, you and me."

Sitting up—I wondered if she ever wore a night gown—she fluffed her yellow hair, as if it was a medal. "Glad it's you and me, that stuck-up bitch gives me a pain. Hey, how about some mouthwash from my bottle you have in your room?"

"There's orange juice waiting for you downstairs. Let's go."

Grace was sitting at a table on the veranda, looking very cool in a white silk dress and a lot of silver junk. When Janis joined us we had a great 'Mexican' breakfast of juice, coffee, and pancakes with a bottle of Vermont maple syrup. The stout woman who ran the pension appeared—with some silly roses in her dyed-black hair—to ask if we would be back for lunch.

I said Janis and I wouldn't be back until supper. As we walked toward the market place, I glanced back and saw the old Englishman at his window, examining the bay through field glasses.

Grace was again being the perfect hostess, pointing out the lighthouse on Roqueta Island in the harbor—where some eager-beavers were already water skiing behind noisy outboards. Swank cruisers and a few fishing boats headed out into the Pacific. The action in Acapulco was around the clock—the bars doing a good business and pink jeeps of the Las Brisas Hilton hotel carrying babes in bikinis to and from the beach.

The market place turned out to be a basket and pushcart affair. It was growing hot and I was wearing my gun and a coat. Grace purchased some silver trinkets—I couldn't find a shirt my size. They sold Janis a loud scarf and a cheap ring. At 10.30 we left Grace, who said she would have lunch at the pension—she wanted to phone the Mexico City university at noon.

I asked a cop where I could rent a car and he pointed out the Hertz office. Passing a crowd around a sidewalk cafe across the street, Janis nudged me. I saw *El Indio* standing, staring at us over the heads of his fans.

We kept walking. "Hey, now, think he followed me?" Janis asked, more pleased than frightened.

"He's working here Sunday, probably boost ticket sales to have him around ahead of time."

I rented a new Olds roadster at the Hertz office, asked how far Matilla was. It was more of a ride than I'd expected—a good 110 miles each way.

A husky, barefooted Mexican wearing a floppy old straw hat pulled down over his face, *serape* bedroll across his back, rope holding up his ragged black pants—was hanging around the place and opened the door of the car for us. Giving him a peso—I found myself staring into Frank Smith's chestnut-brown face. He whispered, "Toussiant, give me a break! I'm snagged up, but badly, my man!"

Glancing at Janis busy fooling with her scarf, eyes on herself in the windshield mirror. I whispered back, "The police are hunting for you."

"Man, tell me something new! Asking as one club mem-

ber to another, please, can I meet you outside your pension in ten minutes?"

"Well, okay, if you want to chance it."

Muttering thanks in Spanish, he bowed and shut the car door.

Driving back to the house—each corner full of automatic lights or traffic cops moving like robots—I told Janis, "Look, I still have to buy a shirt. Put your scarf and stuff in your room, wait for me on the veranda. I'll return in about 15 minutes."

"Well . . . okay. Don't be long. Too hot to sit around."

When I let her off, Bernardo ran up to the car. "Senor Moore, you like to hire a glass bottom boat at Caleta Beach?"

I shook my head.

"Fishing? I show you where big fish. . ."

"Nothing," I said, starting the car. His little tan hustler's face was so disappointed I stopped, gave him a ten-dollar bill—the smallest I had on me, unfortunately. "Bernardo think you can buy me a sport shirt? Something I can wear outside my belt and. . .?"

"I know good place, I buy you two!"

"Just one, and not too loud. Make sure it's large enough. Size 19 neck, although the sizes may be different here, so. . ."

"I go right away. Very good shirt," he said, dashing off.

"I'll be back for it in a half hour," I called after him.

I didn't see Smith around. I drove a few hundred feet along the beach, turned, and cruised back. At a deserted street corner, as neatly as if we had planned to meet there, Smith suddenly stepped out of a cluster of thick bushes, slid in beside me before I stopped the car. "Keep going toward the outskirts of town, Toussiant."

I drove carefully, watching in the mirror for any police jeeps, realizing how it would look if we were stopped. Still, I could always claim I was bringing Frank in.

Reaching the edge of the city, I drove past some shacks, turned into a sandy road and stopped. I asked Smith, "Now what the hell is your sad story?"

Chapter 7

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"... I'M DUCKING THE COPS with ease due to my knowing Mexico, speaking the lingo. But seeing you at a non-tourist hotel like the Prince Montio, I figured they'd wised-up, put a home boy on my tail. After searching your room that first day, I decided even if you looked like a cop, you weren't one. Then..."

"Take it slower—deal again. How did you get the travelers checks?" I asked, lighting my pipe. One of Smith's little cigars was stinking up the sunlight.

"I'm not an irreligious man, Toussiant," he told me, "but it might be said they dropped from Heaven. My trouble has always been being born 35 years too damn soon—all down the line. I was a hell of a ball player back in . . . 1925. Played with Negro pro teams for peanuts, far as money or living conditions went. Even played with big league palefaces here in Mexico, and winter ball in Cuba. Next, I'm hustling in Chicago as a first rate carpenter. Had my own cabinet shop, but since I couldn't rent a location to attract the grey trade, that failed. I'm in California during the war, making airplane parts. Second the war's over, the union has all us 'Indians' sacked for not being members of their lily-white union. Anyway, about 1952, I finally got into a union, worked for a half a dozen years or so. Also married a nurse, back in '50—lovely woman. In 1959 I'm retired, on a penny-ante pension from the union—plus Social Security. The wife is only a few years away from her pension, so..."

"Smith—Bane . . . Frank, get with it. I haven't time for your life history."

He shook his head sadly. "Trouble with the world today,

nobody has time for history. Well, we come down here—I always had Mexico in mind—going to set me up a one-man furniture shop catering to the rich tourists. First, the wife takes sick and I use up all our dough caring for her. She died. Then I find it's rough for a foreigner to start a business here. I'm still getting by, but only just, on my little monthly checks. Ever been in Ensenada, Toussiant?"

"No."

"It's the Mexican end of the California peninsula, directly south of San Diego. Good country, but too hot and rough for tourists. I'm living there because my checks stretch farther. It's a port town and some rich *weak* folks stop in their fishing yacht. This day I'm taking it easy near a dock while a couple of these loudmouthed whites are cleaning up the yacht, all of them drunk-back. They go ashore for more booze, leaving one guy—Frank Smith. Way I heard it later, he decided to air the bilge gas fumes—while smoking a cigarette. Big explosion, rocks the town—Smith is in shreds. Know what drops smack on my head?"

"The checks. What's . . . ?"

"Better than that—the whole side of Smith's sport jacket! Not only a fat book of travelers checks, over \$8,000 in \$100 checks, but also his wallet with a few bucks, identification and credit cards. He was a Texas oil man. I don't have to tell you anymore—it was too easy, a name like Frank Smith. If it had been, say, Josef Cohen, or Pat McCarthy—with my color. But, man, Frank Smith—how could I help but swinging at that ball?"

"So you struck out: started cashing them like crazy?"

Frank shook his head. "You won't believe this, but at first I was going to return them. Naturally the blast created a lot of excitement in Ensenada, and before I knew it the rest of the fishing party had a chartered plane fly in for them. I started thinking: for all anybody knew the travelers checks had burned with Frank Smith. If he had a family, they had no way of knowing how many checks he'd cashed *before* he was killed. They might not even know about the checks—

being oil-rich, eight grand could be pocket change. Copying his signature wasn't hard—I had time on my hands. Well, I went over to Juarez, cashed one in a bar. Snap—with all his identification cards. I returned to the bar a few weeks later, to see if any stink had been raised about the check. Nothing—seemed I was in. I cashed a few more, moving around, keeping to Mexico—a Negro cashing a travelers check in the States was too easy to spot. All told, I only used about \$500 worth in three months."

Frank paused to spit over the side of the car, relight his stinking cigar. "In Monterrey I have a chance to buy a silver shop. I cashed two grand worth of checks: boom-boom . . . that tubby cracker you tangled with last night comes down on me. I've been a few jumps ahead of him ever since."

"Maybe not even one jump right now."

"He thinks I've doubled back to Mexico City—I saw him take the morning plane. The fat hell of it all is this: I now have over five months Social Security and pension checks waiting for me at a house in Ensenada—about \$1000—and I'm afraid to go back there. Of course, I know you're a dick, but . . ."

"What makes you think that?"

"At the bull fight, when I stood up to let you pass—felt the roscoe on your hip. Man, you gave me an awful fright—I left Mexico City faster than a scared rabbit. But now I know you're not after me; working for the bull critic's widow. Saw you with her last night, and outside the hotel in Mexico City. And you have that hungry blonde of *El Indio's* along. I remember the way you pumped me for info about Cuzo. Toussiant, maybe I can help you. There was a rumor she claimed the Indian had killed her husband and . . ."

"Help me with what?" I cut in. "I'm a mail carrier. . . ."

"Toussiant, when I thought about it. I recalled reading about you in *Ebony*, *Jet*, or one of those mags—cracking a big TV killing."

"You didn't finish the article, didn't read about my giving up the badge for a postman's tin."

He laughed. "And the gun? You carrying registered mail down here? Look, whatever you're doing is your business. I appreciate your socking that lousy grey dick, all the racket was a break for me, gave me a chance to haul hips out of . . ."

"Frank, did you follow me down to Acapulco?"

"Nope. I came here because I'm busted, and it's easier to pass a check in a tourist trap. Toussiant, can you lend me some dough; I'm real beat?"

"How much is dough?"

He hesitated, his head working like a rusty adding machine. "Hundred? I'll give you a check and even if it's stopped, you don't get hooked . . ."

"Come on, Bane, talk smart—they suspect me of working with you as it is. As one club member to another a long way from home. I'll give you \$25."

"I accept—with thanks! Overheard you're driving to Matilla—what's breaking down there?"

"Merely a name I picked off the map," I said quickly. "If the Hertz people knew where I'm really going—rough spot up in the mountains—they might not have rented their car for . . ."

"So you *are* on a case! Touie, I know this country, let me . . ."

"What I'm doing here is too long a story, for now," I cut in, taking out three tens—I still didn't have anything smaller. "I'm trying to sell somebody a service. Leave it at that. Here's \$30. Where are you headed?"

"Puerto Angel—sleepy port down the coast. Carrying my good clothes in my blanket. . . I'll cash a check there, go on to Guatemala, or cross over to Vera Cruz and take a boat. The cops may not be aware of my monthly checks; if I can reach Canada . . . might have my mail forwarded. . . Listen, my man, give me a lift to Matilla—that's half way to Puerto Angel?"

I slipped him a corny wink. "Told you I'm steering for the mountains, have things to do there with the blonde."

Bane looked mildly disgusted. "Okay. Thanks for the money." Stepping out of the Olds, he waved and started down the road, bare feet slapping the dust. Watching him in the mirror as I turned the car around, he should have been a pathetic figure in that crazy outfit. He wasn't.

I reached the pension as the noon sun was directly overhead. The plump woman, who never seemed to leave the 'desk,' said Janis was in her room.

Janis wasn't exactly 'in,' but on the verge of passing out. Sprawled on the bed in her wrinkled dress and shoes, she was finishing a pint of *pulpque*, the room smelling like an old sewer. Waving the nearly empty bottle at me, she mumbled in loose drunken talk, "Big ... cool ... smart ... dee-teck-ive. Outfoxed you ... last night, big boy. Bought me *two* bottles. Yes, I did ... I did!"

I took the bottle—she sort of threw it at me. Rolling her eyes, she drawled, "Knew you'd ... be ... hunting a bottle ... so I let you find ... big soldier ... had this one in my purse ... all the time."

She gave me a Bronx cheer with her skinny lips, turned, seemed to bury her face in the long blonde hair. Putting the bottle down, I turned Janis over, shook her gently—a snore came from her slack mouth. Neither a cold shower or walking her around would do any good for a couple of hours, and I had a 200-mile trip to make.

I went downstairs and sat in the Olds, tired and mad. No point in driving to Matilla alone—I couldn't speak Spanish. I went inside and asked the woman if she had any idea where Bernardo was.

She waved her fat arms as if parting the air. "Very hard ... say, *senor*. He could be anyplace ... buying you shirt."

"I'll be in my room. I want to see him soon as he returns."

"You like lunch? *Senora* Lupe-Varon have lunch and go out to ..."

"No. Send Bernardo up when he comes back."

I went up and stretched out on the bed. It was hot and I opened the shutters, tried to sleep. Grace spoke fine Spanish,

but it didn't seem right taking her with me—paying me and doing the job at the same time. Besides, Matilla could turn out to be another blank.

I sunk into a sluggish sleep, wishing Fran was beside me, wanting to hear her cool voice. Bane and his troubles; drunken Janis; cold Grace and her snakes, searching for the face of God. That stupid dick last night . . . Lt. Tortela and his musical comedy uniform. . . . Fran seemed the only normal being left in the world. I felt like a pimp—thousands of miles from my home and wife, sticking my nose into everybody's troubles without settling my own affairs—and all for a big buck.

I awoke to a persistent knocking on the door. The sun was coming through the window and I was wet with sweat. It was a few minutes after two. Bernardo waved a baby pink shirt in my face, blinding me.

"Senor, you like? Very fine shirt, weaved by hand! Pure cotton. No get small or change color when you wash. Nine bucks! I have time finding one so big, for you."

"It's great," I said, taking the monstrosity. He handed me my change and I told him to keep the pesos, as he expected. I washed up and went to Janis' room. She was snoring up a breeze in fog of harsh *pulque* fumes.

Returning to my room I hung the shirt in the closet. "You do not try it on?" the kid asked, disappointed.

"Later. Senora Lupe-Varon downstairs?"

"I do not see her."

"Bernardo, how would you like to ride down to Matilla with me?"

His coffee-colored face became one great smile. "Senor, I go for that! I like riding in car, very much. My great god-mother live in Matilla."

"Good. Let's keep this a . . . eh . . . secret. Tell whoever you have to, you're going to show me the country. Understand?"

"Senor, you bet!"

Downstairs, he rattled some Spanish to the plump woman,

who didn't seem to mind if he took the afternoon off. I told her, "When the blonde—Senorita Kent—awakes, tell her to stay here. We will be back about supper time."

Minutes later the kid and I were speeding south on the road I'd last seen Smith-Bane walking. I told the boy I was a writer doing a story on the famous *El Indio*, who I understood was born near Matilla.

"I see the great one at a cafe this morning. I never hear he was born in Matilla—they would make a big statue in his honor. True, I have only been in the village two times, myself. It is but a few huts and sheds. Fishing is hard business, Senor Moore. What you call the rough buck."

"Perhaps your godmother can tell me about the matador. I'd like to bring her a gift. What does she want?"

"Cigarettes."

"Any stores along the road where I can buy some?"

"No, but I have," he said, pulling an unopened pack of Camels from inside his red vest. I wouldn't have been too surprised if he had a girl hidden in his back pocket.

"Good. I'll pay you for them—also for your time."

He nodded. "I cannot be sure my godmother will talk—these country people do not speak to . . . strangers. But I do my best." He pulled out a crumpled pack of butts, offered me one.

I shook my head. "Your father know you smoke?"

"I never see my father. Mama live in bad shack with many kids. Now I am man, I go away. Very good living at hotel, I eat well, some tips. I grow up strong as you."

"Not if you smoke," I said like an idiot, wondering why I was lecturing him. "Go ahead, smoke."

"No, too much wind." He put the pack away. "Ah, this very smooth car. Some day, I have one."

I roughed up his hair. "Sure, Bernardo, some day you'll be the President of Mexico," I said, talking like an ass.

The roads were good and mostly empty except for a few donkey carts. Several planes passed overhead, while out on the Pacific we saw native fishing boats, a few fancy cruisers.

The country was sandy and barren, although in toward the mountains I saw small farms, even heavy woods. Able to do 60 most of the way, I was amazed at not passing Frank Bane along the road.

Bernardo hadn't been lying—Matilla wasn't even a wide spot on a road: merely some miserable huts facing a wonderful beach with a couple of heavy wooden rowboats high on the sand, donkeys, and a flock of chickens running among a few runty trees. Stinking nets were drying in the mild breeze and sun. There was a combination *cantina* and general store made of sundried bricks, an ancient and rusty truck parked behind the shop.

Bernardo pointed to a hut with a thatched roof, apart from the others. I didn't see a soul around but when we got out of the Olds some dark—mostly naked children approached—all gazing at me as if I had seven heads. Their stomachs were swollen from too much fruit, and all had skin sores. The kids filled me with anger—I wished Fran could see them, all her lovely talk about bringing more brats into the world!

In a most business-like manner, Bernardo scattered the kids by pulling out a handful of hard candies from his pocket, tossing them at the children.

Bernardo's godmother was a wizened, walking skeleton in a coarse white, bleached dress . . . who must have been at least 100. Her bare feet were large and thick, thin white hair tied into a bun atop her head, and to my surprise, her leather-skin seemed nearly dark as mine, although her hooked nose was knife-sharp. An ugly, fog-blue cataract covered her left eye, but in contrast the other eye was clear-bright.

The inside of the hut was clean, pitifully bare—a couple of mats on the dirt floor formed a bed, one battered table, crates used for chairs, large driftwood stump, a homemade crucifix on the wall above a faded picture of a saint. Chickens ran about and, except for the open door, the windowless hut had no ventilation—and many flies.

The crone stared at me for a long time, her face a wrinkled mask, while Bernardo rattled off Spanish. I was

certain he was apologizing for bringing a *gringo* to her hut. She cut him off with a few sharp words, came over to touch my hand, stood on claw-like toes to run her rough hand over my cheek. Finally she grinned, showing a mouthful of stubby, strong teeth.

Feeling my shoulders, my coat, she said something to Bernardo in her cracked voice. He nodded with relief as he told me, "My great godmother say she glad to see man of her darkness so powerful in size, dressed well. She begs you to sit."

He pointed toward a crate which would have crumpled under my lard. With a smart bow, I handed her the pack of butts, sat on the driftwood stump.

The old woman shrilled something and a thin girl of about 10, a shy, skinny little thing with wild dark hair and big eyes, wearing only a patched sack dress—came running in to place a wooden bowl of eggs and odd-looking fruits on the table. The kid gave me a fast glance as she raced out. Clutching the pack of cigarettes, the old gal motioned for me to eat.

I thanked her, my stomach suddenly remembering I hadn't had lunch. I picked up a slice of a rich pinkish fruit studded with black pits. Moving with amazing agility, the godmother took a pinch of rock salt from a cup on a shelf, sprinkled it on the fruit, then bit into a lemon, squeezed a dash of juice on top of the salt.

To my astonishment—it was delicious.

"What is this?" I asked the kid.

"Papaya. Be careful, *senor*, eating here." Bernardo pointed to the other fruits, big as a peach, some of them a dull black, others a pale grey. "These are *chico-zapote*, very good—but not for you."

The old biddy barked some Spanish at him and he answered her, then motioned for me to eat. I tried one and it had an interesting taste, like an over-ripe pear.

The old lady motioned for me to eat more as she lit a cigarette. I not only wanted to please her, but this was what

I'd been looking for—real Mexican food. Besides, the fruit seemed washed and clean.

Bernardo sat on his crate, watching me with troubled eyes. He said, "She thinks I tell you the food is bad. She does not understand, like I do, about—*gringo* stomachs."

"Kindly tell your godmother the food is wonderful. Also ask if she knows *El Indio*."

"Si, but please do not touch the eggs, or you get *el tourism* for sure." He turned to the old lady, talking to her in low and swift Spanish.

She turned out to be a jackpot of information.

"Yes," Bernardo translated, "she says *El Indio* was raised here. That is true. Not many of the village remember this, but she says she is the oldest and recalls when he and his brother first came to Matilla—as very small children, barely able to walk. They come with a rich *patron*, Senor Zayas. The boys were his slaves. They . . ."

"Slaves?" I repeated, certain Bernardo hadn't heard right.

"Ay, slaves, she says, as her father once was. Her father came from a land far over the sea, but the great matador is a true Indian, of pure blood as one sees from his face. He is from land far to the South, on a mighty river called Amazon. This I know from the lovely Senora Zayas, for whom I often washed and cooked. The matador is from the Campa tribe, of which there are many Indians on this giant river. It is a hard country of great jungles and the Senor Zayas had a farm there of much land, to grow the rubber. They made many pesos. They came here because he was dying of jungle dampness and they build a great house at the foot of the hills, behind Matilla. Now it is a ruin, but I remember it as the most beautiful house I have ever seen. The wife was indeed a kind woman with soft hair the color of a good pearl, reaching almost to her feet when she let it hang. A good woman of much beauty, who gave the two young boys their freedom, treated them like sons. She had no children of her own, living. When the boys were still small, maybe 6 years old, the Senor Zayas died. Later the good wife with the

beautiful hair left. For Spain, it was said, her home. She was sick herself at the death of her man. Much sick here." The old lady touched her head, as did Bernardo, the faithful translator.

"She take the boys to Spain?" I asked, lighting my pipe and taking another hunk of fruit.

The godmother sniffed the hot air inside the hut, said—via Bernardo, "The smoke you make is truly wonderful. It does my heart good to see a dark man have so much, a great car, a pipe which makes perfume."

I thanked her, asked again if Cuzo had gone to Spain.

"No. Senora Zayas left suddenly and never returned. It was a hard blow to the boys. For a time they lived in the house, ran wild. Then, when they were . . . when Jose was about 9 years, they too vanished from the house and Matilla one night. They were never seen again, but *El Indio* returns near here often in his wonderful flying bird—for a few minutes. Shortly after the other flying wonder comes to earth. The matador does not speak to any of us, but he did give the visiting priest much pesos once, and we had a grand fiesta for our Saint . . ."

"Hold it, Bernardo. Ask what 'other flying wonder' she's talking about? If she means there are two planes?"

He asked, and when the Spanish chatter died down, told me, "Si, she says there are two planes."

"Now ask her this carefully: the second plane—not *El Indio's*—does it have two engines?"

He asked and the old lady nodded vigorously, held up two crooked fingers.

"Ask—does a woman pilot this second plane with the two engines?" I said, feeling the excitement well up within me.

When the kid translated, the godmother shook her head, seemed to indicate a woman by pointing to her own flat breasts.

Turning to me, Bernardo said, "No, no, she says she has never seen a woman, no woman would dare fly in such a machine. The brother of Senor Cuzo drives the larger plane.

She also says few people in the village even know of this other plane, for it lands far down the beach, and when most of the men are out in their boats. My great godmother has a garden on some land several miles away, which is why she sees the other plane—a few times.”

In this crazy case, every time I thought I had a lead, I always turned out to be following my own behind. Munching on more papaya, I asked, “Are they twins?”

Bernardo screwed up his thin face. “Twins? What is that word?”

“The brothers, do they look exactly alike?”

A moment later he told me, “She says no. One brother is fat, and also older, and he still has the scar of a long cut on his face.”

“Nobody else meets them? Does anybody come with the older brother in his plane?” I asked.

“She says she has never seen anybody but the two brothers.”

“Ask her what the brothers do when they meet? Are they carrying packages, boxes?”

Nodding his head in time with the beat of her words, Bernardo said, “That she can not tell you. While I often see both bird machines in the air, it was only one time I saw them together on the beach. My garden is on high ground and inland, so they could not see me. But my one eye has the strength of two now. I see very good.”

“Can she tell me exactly what happened that one time?” I said, relighting my pipe.

The old lady suddenly rubbed her bony shoulders, with delight. Bernardo told me, “She say never has she smell tobacco rich as yours.”

“Tell her it will be an honor to leave the pipe and tobacco here,” I said, wondering why the kid had never told me the old babe’s name. “Now ask her what the brothers did when they met.”

“She says first the old brother’s big bird machine landed and he waits. Soon *El Indio* comes down in his little red

bird—but up the beach. The matador runs over to the other plane. They shake hands and talk for a short time. They laugh and joke, as brothers will. Then the bigger bird machine runs up into the air. Senor Cuzo returns his plane, which also takes off. She say it is indeed a miracle to fly like a bird, and without feathers. It would frighten her to fly, she say.”

“Does this happen every week? Ask her how often they meet?”

Bernardo talked to the woman for several minutes while she counted on her fingers, kept pointing out the open door toward the sun. Finally the boy told me, “She is not sure of when they come. It is every few days. But she does not go to her garden every day, either, so they may come and she would not see it. But in the hot months they do not come at all.”

“Ask if they come on any special day, like on a Monday? Is it the same day whenever they meet? By a few days, does she mean once a week, once a month?” They didn’t fly in during the hot months—and in the summer there aren’t any bull fights in Mexico, either.

“She says it is hard to keep track of days here, except for Holy ones. She says the planes come once every six or seven days. She also asks you eat some of her eggs, but I do not advise it, senor.”

“Tell her I have had so much fruit I can eat no more. Also, I think it is time we leave.” I stood up and thanked her, cleaned my pipe and made her a present of the rest of the cleaners, the Comoy pipe, my tobacco pouch and matches.

She pumped my hand, insisted I take two eggs with me. I thanked her again and stepped outside. A number of people and naked kids who were examining the Olds—fled as we approached. “Bernardo, do you know where the house of the Zayas is? I want to see it.”

“I will find out,” he said, sprinting back to his god-mother’s hut.

I stood beside the car, knowing people were watching me from inside the huts, behind the paper window of the *cantina*. I was trying to figure out what all the old lady told me meant—if anything.

Bernardo came dashing back, shouting, "I show you—not too far."

We got in the car and as I drove off a man stuck his fat bald head out of the door of the *cantina*, shouted at Bernardo. The boy rattled Spanish back at him, told me, "He wanted to know if you were from a newspaper like the other man. I said, yes, you . . ."

I stopped the Olds so abruptly, Bernardo almost hit the dash. "What other man?"

The kid called out something and the baldy—wearing only dirty white pants over his big belly—came over to the car. His tan chest was as smooth as a woman's skin. Touching his head in a kind of timid salute, he leaned forward and slyly rubbed his finger against the skin of my hand, then examined his finger as he talked. Bernardo translated: "He say today, when the matador's red plane flew over, a man, who said he was a Mexican, a *mestizo*, but was lying, was here. This man said he was from a newspaper and also asking about *El Indio*."

"A barefooted man?"

"He says no, the man was in an old car and dressed good, with a little round green hat on."

This had to be Frank Bane and his green beret—either he'd had a car stashed away all the time, or had bought one with his travelers checks. "Ask him if he knows where the man is now?"

The shirtless *cantina* man shrugged, several chins dancing, fat chest and belly shaking. The boy told me, "He say the man drive away—he does not know where. That was few hours ago. He say man speak good Spanish, but he still think man was . . . eh . . . *gringo*, like you."

A small crowd had gathered around us. Puffing like a steam engine on my pipe, the old godmother came up the

road, actually running stiff-legged, to see what was going on. There was much chattering and hand-waving: the godmother seemed angry at the stout man for talking to me—her prize guest. She even pointed to her skin, darker than the fat man's. He started yelling at her and, instead of answering, the old lady suddenly puffed on the pipe, blew smoke at the crowd. The talking stopped and they looked at her with awe. I asked Bernardo what was going on.

"They are admiring the sweet smoke you gave her."

"Ask your godmother if she talked to this other ... writer."

When Bernardo spoke to her the old lady shook her head, went through a routine of shrugging her shoulders and spitting on the ground—obviously trying to impress the others that no visitor was as important as her guest—me. I waved at her, honked my horn, and we drove off—leaving the entire population of Matilla still intently sniffing my aromatic tobacco.

The remains of the 'great' house of the Zayas were about a mile inland, at the foot of a low mountain slope. I drove the Olds over an ancient path full of weeds up to this crumbling rock wall fencing in about an acre of land, the wall disappearing in tall grass and bush, here and there. There wasn't much to see, a few roofless walls of dirty-white rock and clay, the remains of a doorway and one window. At no time had the 'great' house been more than three or four large, crude rooms.

We didn't leave the car. Bernardo said, "Senor, it would not be good to walk in all those weeds. In such places as ruins are found *serpiente*—snakes."

"Nothing to see, it hasn't been lived in for years," I said, backing the Olds down the path. Obviously the 'road' hadn't seen a car in months, if ever, except where my tires had trampled the weeds.

Wanting to reach Acapulco before night, I kept the gas pedal on the floor. The kid cracked one of the eggs, sucked out the insides, telling me, "I will not offer you the other egg.

Senor, why is it the tourists from up North have good clothes and fine cameras, and some—like you—are very strong; yet all have weak bellys? I can eat anything, but you . . . you should not have eaten that fruit. . . .”

The kid talked up a blue streak. Did I know chewing gum was said to be made from the *chico-zapote* fruit? Was I feeling okay? Even if I got *el tourism*, he knew a smart doctor who would fix me up. . . .

I wasn't listening, of course, my mind racing like crazy in a mental maze. Had my boon buddy, Frank Bane, merely been nosing around Matilla to see if there was a fast peso to be picked up? Or, had he been interested in *El Indio* from the jump? Wasn't impossible he *and* Parks were working together, the whole travelers check bit a front . . . But for what? Still, as Frank himself had said, it was a kind of coincidence we both were at the Prince Montio Hotel in Mexico City. Could Bane have followed me there from the airport? But that didn't add, unless he'd been following Grace before I ever came to Mexico. Hell, for all I knew, he could even be working with her. I'd have to see what she knew about him.

But mostly I felt Frank was merely hustling on the fringe. I also had the feeling the old lady's info on Cuzo could be the can-opener to everything, but at the moment I still didn't know which end was up. *Two* planes meant big money. True, the Indian was raking in the pesos, but why the brief plane meeting outside this isolated village? I couldn't recall anything in Juan Lupe-Varon's notes about the matador having a brother. . . . But I had no way of knowing how much of her husband's files Grace had given me.

One thing was for sure: the brothers met about once a week during the bull fight season, it had to be more than a family reunion. Janis said Cuzo had parted with a lot of dough when she was with him at one meeting, but if he was only giving the dough to big brother to bank, why not send a check, or bank it here? Hardly be a tax dodge, Cuzo's earnings were on the sport pages all the time. It sounded like

a smuggling operation, but the only folding money in smuggling these days is in dope. A pound of heroin could be a tiny enough packet for the old lady not to notice from a distance. But with Cuzo's purses, why bother with that kind of trouble?

We reached Acapulco at about six-thirty. I had a headache—and not only from thinking: Bernardo knew his *el tourism*—I barely made the rest room of the first gas station. When I came out, feeling weak as a cat, Bernardo smugly gave me a chorus of, "I told you so," and steered me to a sleepy-looking middle-aged doc with liver spots on his pale white skin, looking as if he'd never stepped out of his gloomy office. In a bored manner, he gave me a couple of horse pills, told me in broken English I had been foolish in eating *chico-zapotes* . . . the white ones were a laxative. He advised me to eat only boiled rice for a day, stay away from all liquids and iced drinks, rest, and to pay him fifteen bucks.

When we left the office, Bernardo suddenly remembered he'd left 'something' in the waiting room, went back in—to get his rake-off. I drove the Olds to the Hertz garage, settled up, and as we were walking to the pension—I wasn't sure I'd make it—the boy pointed to a crowd around one of the bars: it seemed as if Cuzo hadn't moved from the sidewalk table I'd seen him sitting at in the morning.

Bernardo said, "Senor, there is the famous *El Indio*! He will be pleased to know you are doing a story about him. . . ."

Grabbing the boy by his bright vest as he started across the street—aware Cuzo was watching us—I whispered to the kid to shut-up; the matador would demand money for writing about him—Bernardo was never to tell anybody about our going to Matilla.

This was logical to his little hustling mind.

Reaching the pension, the woman at the desk waved a letter at me, but I dashed by her and into the john. I came out a half hour later, feeling giddy. Bernardo was explaining my *el tourism* to the woman, who was making sad sounds

and patting her fat cheek in sympathy. It was all so damn ridiculous, I had to laugh. I gave the kid five bucks, which made him happy. . . .

The letter the woman had for me was from Grace, written on a piece of scrap paper—she was flying to Mexico City . . . something to do with her experiments at the university. She wrote she would fly back Friday night, I was to phone her if I left before then. She would take care of the bill at the pension. I asked, “When did Mrs. Lupe-Varon leave?”

“Soon after you drive away with Bernardo. She phone Mexico City, then leave. She seem upset, senior.”

“Where is Miss Kent?”

“The senorita is sleeping, in your room,” the woman answered, as if she’d been waiting for me to ask. There was a bitchy grin on her fat mouth which said Janis was still crooked.

“In my room?” Janis had certainly found her bottle I’d hidden in my closet.

“Si, Senior Moore. She insist I hand her key to your room. She say you do not mind. I do wrong?”

Like the timing in a bad movie, I was saying, “No, it isn’t your. . . .” when Janis’ shrill scream of terror filled the house. I ran up the stairs, gun in hand, as she came staggering out of my room—naked body a deathly pale-white. Her mouth was wide open, straining, as though her lungs couldn’t get sufficient air. Her tongue was like a swollen pink pickle. Janis held both hands to her thin neck, tearing at the skin . . . staring at me with unseeing, glassy eyes ready to pop from her pale face.

She crumpled across the doorway before I could reach her. I saw a heavy set woman climbing out the window of my room. As she leaped for the tree, I dropped her with a lucky shot—heard her hit the courtyard below with a thud as I jumped over Janis, ran to the window.

Looking down, in the dim twilight, I saw a large crumpled body, sprawled on her stomach, blood seeping beneath the head of black bobbed hair, and from her hips and legs. A

husky tan woman in torn man's white pants, and dirty shirt. The bare feet were immense.

Feeling sick and dizzy, I walked back to Janis. The *pulpque* stink was coming out of her open mouth like vapor, past the tongue which seemed ready to burst in its horrible thickness. The eyes were two misty-blue marbles. I put my hand under her little left breast, the skin already cold. There wasn't any heart beat.

I'd known she was dead when she toppled to the floor.

Standing, I glanced around the room like a stranger. The large bottle I'd taken from Janis the night before was on the table beside my bed, half-full. I walked over to the crumpled bed—it still held the faint, damp heat of her body.

I knew if I didn't keep moving I'd pass out. I ran down the stairs—Bernardo and the pension woman staring at the gun in my hand with horror. Shouting, "Phone the police!" I raced out, and around to the back.

I saw the 'woman' was a man, his black hair cut in rough bangs across his wide forehead. I could only see part of the peanut-colored flat face. The teeth between his thick bloody lips seemed sharpened to points. The arms were thickly muscled, and under the coarse shirt the powerful shoulders of a weight-lifter.

I stood there, thinking many things: Even in the war I'd never shot anybody to death and the thought I'd gunned a man made me tremble. I had visions of rotting the rest of my life in some crummy Mexican jail, never seeing Fran again . . . or the baby.

I heard a car come to a braking stop. I walked around to the front of the pension, nearly stumbled into Lt. Tortela.

"Man, you sure made it fast," I heard myself saying, in a hoarse whisper.

"What is going on here?" he asked, yanking the gun from my hand. "I come to tell you we found Senor Frank Bane—dead. A hysterical woman inside shouts you have killed a . . ."

"Bane's dead?" I repeated, my head spinning.

"Auto accident—his car crashed into an electric power pole outside of town. But I am ordering an autopsy. That is why I am here. Bane's dying words were to you. He said, 'Toussiant—slow motion.' What does that mean, Senor Moore?"

"I don't know."

"Senor, you must know what connection the words have with . . . something? I . . ."

"I don't know a damn thing, except I have to get to the bathroom—fast!"

Chapter 8

.

TORTELA HAD RINGED off the area with police and while I sat in one corner of the small lobby like the class dunce, he questioned Bernardo, the pension woman, and the maids, in rapid Spanish. The other pension guest, the Englishman, appeared with a fishing rod and a bag of small fish—said he'd been surf casting most of the afternoon. Tortela let him go up to his room.

I felt tired, sick, and mostly damn angry. My anger seemed to form layers: I was suddenly sore at Fran for becoming pregnant—forcing me into this mess. Mad at myself for returning to the dirt of private snooping. I was also steamed at Kay and Ted, at Grace, and even her dead husband, for starting the whole damn case.

All this was a gassy anger.

There was also, beneath this, a very real and solid cold anger at Cuzo—or whoever had murdered Janis. I felt responsible for her death—I'd dragged her into this, and somehow I'd square it—*that* was far more important than solving the case.

Lt. Tortela sitting behind the pension desk like a judge, playing with an ivory letter-opener in the shape of a long slender finger, with a very red nail, called me over. "Now, senior, you and I shall have some *very* straight talk."

"Sure," I said, looking around for a chair, my stomach rumbling. I felt giddy and nauseous.

Tortela was busy: his left hand fooled with his thin moustache while his right pointed the ivory finger at me. "I will tell you when to sit, Senor Moore! Let us clear the air of a few things first. You *gringos* think all Mexicans are 'quaint'

and dumb; despite the darkness of your skin, Moore, you are a *gringo* down here! If you believe you are dealing with hick cops, I must warn you not to make me show you how false the idea is. I know all police tricks—*all* of them, including ways of beating a man without showing any marks! Another thing: the tourists are Acapulco's major industry, and murder is hardly a tourist attraction. I plan to clear this up quickly and as I decide best. Do we understand each other, Senor Moore?"

I nodded, expecting his next words to be he was throwing me in the can. "I shot that man in self-defense. . . ."

Tortela held up the ivory finger. "My cursory examination shows no bullet wounds. You missed him. He died as the result of an awkward fall. True, your firing may have caused him to jump quickly and . . . You do not know the other cause of his death?"

"What other cause?" I was damn certain I'd plugged the guy.

"Follow me."

We walked outside, around to the body under my window. Two cops, guarding the corpse, snapped to attention as Lt. Tortela approached. They had turned bangs-head over so he was flat on his broad back—the unseeing eyes in his crushed head staring boldly into Lt. Tortela's flash. Next to the dead man—he must have landed on top of it—was a crumbled bamboo tube about two feet long—and the mangled remains of a thick snake. It was an ugly brown and mottled black, part of the diamond-shaped head busted open to show horrible needle-like fangs, thick blood, and a pus-yellow cream.

Tortela said, "The creamy liquid is venom. We don't know the type of snake, but he had much poison. Whether the fall killed the man, I can not tell. But he must have been holding the wooden tube, crushed it open on falling, and the snake venom entering the man's blood stream, certainly finished the killing. As of now, I am calling it an accidental death."

Staring at the evil fangs, the deadly venom, my insides

began churning with rage. I was so mad I didn't even get what Tortela had said. "Did this snake kill Janis?"

"I doubt it—it would not be back in the tube. I saw no breaks on her skin. It is my opinion she was sleeping with her mouth open and some kind of very powerful poison dropped between her lips. The tongue is swollen beyond imagination and badly burned. Let us go inside and talk—the truth."

"The truth suits me fine! I only want to know who murdered an innocent babe like poor drunken Janis, who . . ."

Lt. Tortela cut me off with a sly chuckle. "Senor, I doubt very much if the yellow-haired one was the innocent kind."

"Come on, there are all kinds of innocence!" I snapped, as we entered the pension again, hot and cold flashes gripping my belly.

As Tortela took his seat behind the desk, I ran my hand over my sweaty face, thinking of Janis coming out of a drunken stupor to see this nightmare bending over . . . when the meaning of what Tortela had just said outside got through to my whirling brain. If he was calling the snake man's death an accident—then I was in the clear!

My anger didn't grow less, merely colder. I was going to get the killer and the way to do it was—play things by ear, shake the cops off my back first, so I could operate. Nothing mattered except getting her murderer.

Toying with the letter-opener, which seemed to fascinate him, Tortela said, "Senor Moore, you are a remarkable man, and I do not talk of your size now. Three people have died by violent death in the last few hours—all people connected with you. In fact, far as I know now, you are the *only* connection. Logically, you should be our prime suspect, but then, life is rarely logical—if it was, there would be little need for police officials. You have witnesses placing you downstairs when the blonde was killed; the boy backs up your story that you two were together most of the afternoon—certainly at the time of Senor Bane's death—and from the condition of his body I have reason to suspect he was

poisoned before he lost control of his car. As for the dead creature in the yard, I believe your story—for if you had been close enough to toss him out of the window—and he was a powerful man—he certainly would have thrown the snake at you. As I stated before, I wish to close these cases quietly and quickly, so tell me what the hell you are doing down in Acapulco!” He really put a growl in this.

“I am here as a tourist and also trying to sell the services of our agency to. . . .”

“No!” Tortela slapped his open hand on the desk, making a noise like a shot. “I will ask the questions and want no foggy answers! You tell me the killer must have mistaken the dead woman in your bed for you—true, it was twilight, but you would hardly be mistaken for a skinny *blondo*! Let us start from the beginning: What was she doing in your room?”

“In her own way, Janis was a very friendly girl. She was waiting in my bed for me. What better way of greeting a man?” I asked, lying. “Also, she liked to drink, had come to my room for a bottle I had hid from her the night before. This has nothing to do with things. I . . .”

“With what ‘things?’ ”

“I don’t know. I meant our . . . eh . . . affair was a personal matter.”

“Did you see Frank Bane today?”

“No.”

“You last saw him in Mexico City, at the bull ring?”

I nodded.

“Why should his dying words be, ‘Toussiant—slow motion?’ ”

“I wish I knew—that’s the truth.”

“You came to Acapulco with Senora Lupe-Varon?”

“Yes. I met her in Mexico City, she offered to give Janis and myself a lift here in her plane.”

“I warn you for the last time to stop playing games, señor! It is common knowledge she is a snake expert, of how her husband died, of her hate for *El Indio*. You are a private

detective, making inquiries about the matador, living with one of his former girls—it is obvious you are working for Senora Lupe-Varon!”

“Why?” I asked calmly. “Why would she bring a badge all the way from the States?”

Tortela went back to examining the ivory finger. Then he said softly, “Of course I have checked on her; she landed in Mexico City well over an hour before any of the deaths.”

I sighed with relief, glad they had checked out Grace. It narrowed things perfectly—to *only* the Indian.

“What were you doing in Matilla today?”

“What Bernardo told you, gathering material about the matador. I also try to write—one must make bread in many ways.”

“For what journals or magazines?”

“So far I haven’t made a sale. But I figured few people in the States knew about *El Indio*, and since I was here. . . .”

Tortela screwed up his handsome kisser to bark one Spanish word. I had a good idea what it meant, too, before he added in English, “Do not try my patience with crap! Soon we shall learn the identity of the dead man outside, probably a hired killer, and if it should turn out there is a connection between you and him, I will throw the book at you!”

“See if he comes from South America.”

Lt. Tortela sat up straight, as if he’d nailed me in a lie. “Why South America? You claim to never have seen the man before!”

“I haven’t. It’s the bangs hair-do . . . I once read the Amazon River Indians cut their hair like that. Which was why the first Spaniards thought the men large women—how the word Amazon started. I thought I was shooting a woman myself.”

“It takes a strange brand of courage to fire at a woman.”

“Not after seeing Janis die in agony before my eyes!”

“The Amazon River is many hundreds of miles distant—why should a native of that region be in the bedroom of an Acapulco pension?”

"I don't know, but ask Jose Cuzo if he knew the dead man!"

"Senor Moore, I hardly believe the famous matador would be jealous enough of a blonde bag—I will not speak bad of the dead. Are you suggesting there is a connection between Senor Cuzo and the dead man outside?"

"You want my off-hand opinion? Yes!" The word echoed in the room; I realized I was shouting.

Relaxing in his chair, smoothing his trick moustache, Tortela gave me his best slick smile. "I am happy it is but a . . . how you say . . . a top of the head opinion. I advise you not to repeat it. Libel is a serious matter in Mexico. Also, the . . ."

"Cuzo too big for you to touch?" I cut in.

"For the present I ignore the tone of your voice, Senor Moore. No one is big enough to escape Mexican justice, not even the most important *gringo*—remember that! I am an honest man, proud of my job. I will be frank with you—although you have not given me equal respect . . . I am also a career man. To open such a line of inquiry would hardly advance my police career—unless I had positive proof on which to move."

I started for the can. "Lt. Tortela, if I had proof, I wouldn't keep it a secret!"

"Remain here! I will tell you when and if you may go!"

"I have to go right now—stake out the bathroom if you like!"

"Ah, si, si, so the boy told me. That will pass within a day or two. For now I am finished with you, but do not make the mistake of leaving Acapulco without my permission. The unknown man in the yard fell to his death. Senor Bane died in an auto accident, Senorita Kent ended her life a suicide, took poison. That will be it, for now, and . . ."

"Janis wasn't a suicide!" I called over my shoulder, afraid to walk too fast.

"If you have information pointing to any other verdict, give it to me!" Tortela snapped. "I know you are withholding . . . !"

I slammed the door of the bathroom.

When I came out, ten or fifteen minutes later, the police were gone, so were the bodies. Feeling feverish, weak, and sore as a boil. I had no idea of what to do next. I wanted a smoke—and didn't have my pipe. The pension woman was looking at me as if I'd ruined her business, so I walked out, headed up toward the main drag.

Feeling lightheaded, sweating in the cool evening, I went into the first tobacco shop I came to, bought a pipe and tobacco which tasted like yesterday's mattress.

Walking along, I tried to think. I couldn't blame Tortela, I hadn't given him anything to work on except a hunch. That was my trouble, although I was positive Cuzo was behind the whole mess, I hadn't the smallest bit of stand-up proof. I was damn lucky to be walking around, and should be making the most of it, fitting the . . .

A crowd was blocking the sidewalk. I stepped into the street to go around it, when I realized I was in front of the sidewalk cafe where *El Indio* was still the king, holding court. Turning, I pushed my way into the crowd. Cuzo was sipping some kind of iced drink. He stared up at me for a moment, hard and handsome face tense as a pug awaiting the first round bell. I stood there and if he hadn't said anything, I would have moved on: I was too sick to think straight.

Softly, casually, Cuzo said, "So, here is big dark Yankee who seeks the moment of truth—the final answer."

"Janis found your answer!"

He shrugged his compact shoulders, *and smiled*. "That I have just heard. A drunken slut who . . ."

"You murdering bastard!" I yelled.

Cuzo stood up, muttering something in Spanish about '*negra*.' The smile was still on his thin lips—I went to knock it off. He jumped backwards with cat speed—my left hook missed. But shoving a fan aside with my right, I bulled my way in close enough to clout him with another left high on the side of his cheek, knocking him over the next table.

There was the sharp crash of dishes and glasses as the table went, then a deep roar engulfed us and the whole angry mob fell on me. I went down kicking and punching, my head on fire with a high fever . . . feeling fists, shoes, and even a knife.

The mob screams grew distant as I started to drift off into a kind of hot, bloody darkness; bumping over sharp rocks—or fists—now and then. I had one clear thought: how stupid I'd been to lose my temper in front of this howling mob. Dimly, I knew I was being stepped on, kicked, punched . . . and then a soft mass moved from on top of me—light from the cafe hit my face. There was a lull, people pulling away, swarthy faces leering down at me with evil anticipation. I had a vague idea the police had arrived—until the leers told me differently.

Trying to sit up, I had a fast picture of *El Indio*, lean face flushed with hate . . . pulling back a pointed red and tan shoe to stomp my face. Raising my hands to grab his foot, I curled up like a fat worm—to protect my guts and groin. His shoe and my hands seemed to move in slow motion. So did my mind.

Slowly, clearly, I thought of a number of disconnected things.

My hands were bloody; mine or theirs?

Was this what Frank had meant with his dying words about 'slow motion'?

Watching Cuzo's shoe, I even thought: red and tan shoes—what a gaudy joker!

Slowly, the Indian's little foot came directly at my face. It stopped and he seemed to do a mild dance step—actually feinting with his feet—then his other foot came sailing slowly—but surely—past my bloody fingers. Now the shoe came on with rocket speed, exploded in a flash of pain on the side of my head.

I took off into the feverish darkness surrounding me.

Chapter 9

.

SEVERAL TIMES I CAME TO: fleeting moments of awareness before drifting off into the welcome, drugged night . . . again. Once I found myself staring up into Fran's sad brown face. She was wearing a hideous black hat and fish-net veil, holding a baby wrapped in a shiny black silk blanket. The fat tears falling from Fran's soft eyes on my face felt icy cold. Then I realized I was in a coffin, could smell the sickly-sweet flowers around me, felt the satin lining against the back of my head.

"The baby! Fran, please let me see my son!" I yelled.

Frances didn't move, merely wept silently. "If I'm dying—or already dead—let me see my son!" I pleaded, reaching up—my hand covered with caked blood—to pull the dark blanket from the baby's face. Sadly shaking her head, Fran backed off. Then gently, she removed enough of the awful blanket until I saw a miniature Janis with a withered face, long blonde hair, wearing Bernardo's tacky red vest.

Screaming, I went raging off into the darkness again.

Frank Bane was smiling at me, very slowly waving his hand in farewell as he walked down a gloomy, endless road with a herd of fighting bulls; all of them moving slowly, leisurely . . . gracefully.

Another time I floated into the room to see Lt. Tortela's handsome *cafe au lait* face frowning down at me, smelt his tangy after-shave lotion. He said, "Senor Moore, you are a man who—as they say—can take it. It is a miracle we pulled you from the mob alive. One understands their anger—hardly sporting to punch a smaller man, when he was peacefully sitting with his drink, too. Nor hardly wise when his friends . . ."

"Cuzo was standing!" I said, as if it made any real difference.

"... crowded around him," Tortela continued, not hearing me. Maybe my words never made it out of my sore and dry mouth. "You not only have much strength, but much luck: *El Indio* gallantly refuses to press charges. When you are able, I suggest you leave town at once—the streets will not be safe for you. In fact, I hereby order you out of Acapulco. Whether entirely responsible or not, your being here has started a one-man crime wave: street fighting, a riot, and I have not had three murders in as many years..."

"Murders? Thought you had them down as accidental deaths?"

"... much less in one afternoon. But you are fortunate: the knife wounds were not in vital spots, the hospital has ended your *el tourism*..."

Another time Grace was reading a book at my bedside, looking young as a school girl. I floated by without talking to her.

I also had a recurring nightmare where a huge snake with an ugly head larger than mine was up in my face—ready to strike. The horrible, ivory-white curved fangs seemed to touch my nose as the jaws unhinged and the cotton-white inside of the gaping mouth grew larger and larger. Drops of yellowish venom squirted from the fang tips, the hard, merciless eyes boring into mine. I kept straining to jerk my head back, but couldn't move. The darting, purple-red forked tongue came so close I could smell the stink of death. ... Always awoke screaming to the smell of my own wild sweat.

Finally, I was able to open my eyes all the way, gazed for a long time at the white metal hospital bed posts, chipped white enamel table, the white-washed ceiling. I felt weak, but okay. Touching the stubble on my jaw, I moved my arms and legs—everything was in working order. When I attempted to sit up, there was a pain in my left side. I ran my fingers over tape on the ribs.

A cop with a pock-marked tan face and black hair so greasy it looked like a bad processing job . . . motioned for me to lie down again. Whatever he called out in Spanish brought Grace rushing into the room, Followed by Lt. Tortela in his sharp uniform. "Toussiant, how do you feel?" she asked.

"Weak . . . hungry." I turned my head, a tiring job, toward Tortela. "Why the guard? Am I under arrest?"

He gave me his toothpaste ad smile. "No, no, I merely am cautious, don't want any more wild-looking women-like men with snakes visiting you."

"You mean there might be another 'suicide?'"

He shrugged, his shirt so neat I wondered how many times a day he changed uniforms. "As a police officer it is my job to prevent death—all kinds of death. That is why I jail drunken drivers."

"Did the autopsy on Bane show anything?"

"That is still listed as an auto accident," Tortela said, smoothing out his thin moustache.

"What day is this?"

"Saturday evening. You've had a long rest."

Fran must be worried sick at not hearing from me. I started to ask Grace if she had called Ted Bailey in New York, told him what had happened to me—but changed my mind. I was thinking clearly now, didn't want to talk too much in front of the police. Instead, I asked Tortela, "Have you learned the identity of bangshead?"

"I regret to say no, senior. He is not a Mexican national, so tracing him has become an almost impossible job. Senora Lupe-Varon, this charming lady . . . Grace shares your obsession that *El Indio* is the mastermind behind all this. She indeed has such wit and beauty, I would almost act—if offered any possible proof. Facts which would stand up in court, you understand, or at least warrant the start of a probe. On my own I have made a quiet investigation of Senor Bane's death, but so far have come up with nothing which in any way ties in with the matador."

"I have explained to Jorge my suspicions," Grace said, "but. . . ."

I nodded and the effort left me exhausted. Even listening tired me . . . and it no longer mattered what Tortela thought or did: I had my own plan. I listened in a daze as Grace talked . . . about understanding 'Jorge's position,' and fell asleep. I awoke minutes later, they were still in the room and above my tiredness was a very real hunger. I asked for food and a nurse brought in a small plate of tasteless soup and crackers. I argued in vain for more chow, dropped back to sleep.

When I opened my eyes again the sun was out and I heard Sunday church bells. A cream-colored nurse who seemed nearly as tall as Fran, came in with a bed pan but I told her I wanted to walk. It took many words and motions to get the idea over and I was pooped when she finally gave me a pair of far-too-small slippers, walked me to the john. At the door I explained I really could take it from there alone.

I had a good look at myself in the mirror over a wash basin. Except for the stitches on the side of my head, the hair they had shaved off before sewing my scalp—which a hat would cover—I looked my usual homely self. A scab covering a bruise on the other side of my face seemed ready to drop off. My left side was still taped—a couple of fractured ribs, a cut on one thigh had taken four stitches, and there were several sore and tender spots on my back which I couldn't see. Not counting the stitches, I'd come out of football games in worse shape.

Sitting on the edge of the bed I put away a bland breakfast of tea, some kind of juice, bread and jam; went back to sleep. Waking before noon, I walked to the closet for my watch. My suit was a hopeless mess of rips and slashed stains, the pipe gone, wrist watch busted. To my amazement both my gun and wallet were untouched. Grace came in with magazines and I sat on the bed, tried one of her cigarettes, gave it up after a few harsh puffs. "Did you phone Ted Bailey about this?"

She shook her head. "Should I have?"

"No. My wife must be worried at not hearing from me, so I was wondering if you had called Ted—he would have told her. I'll phone her later. Tell me, does Tortela have to report Bane's and Janis Kent's deaths to the U.S. Embassy, make a thorough report?"

"I really don't know. I imagine there has to be a report of some sort to the U.S. government. Who is this Mr. Bane? What happened, Toussiant?"

"Bane was a guy who turned over the wrong rock hunting for a fast buck. But he did me—us—a hell of a big favor. As for what happened—Janis was drunk in my bed, mistaken for me by the guy I shot out of the window—perhaps the same snake thug who killed your Juan. Guess you know this guy carried a snake in a bamboo holster? Well, later I saw Cuzo at a cafe, lost my head . . . Listen, he's fighting here today, will he be in the Mexico City ring next Sunday?"

"Probably, easy to find out. Toussiant, the case is over, I don't mean your fee—I'll pay whatever it amounts to and . . . But I realize now it's hopeless. I'm sorry bringing you into this sordid mess. I never imagined there would be other deaths, or you would be beaten or . . ."

"Nothing is over—yet. Grace, you never stop on the two-yard line. Can we talk freely here? Any chance the room is bugged?"

"Bugged?" She shook her head of sandy-cropped hair, seemed to be wearing the same white blouse she had on when I first saw her. "I get what you mean—I doubt if the electronic age has hit Mexico much beyond the radio and TV stage. We can talk. But what is there to say? I want this to end—now."

"It's going to be finished, soon. When can I leave here?"

"Anytime. Tomorrow, I think. Are you certain you're up to leaving? You lost a lot of blood."

"Yeah. I'll have almost a week to take it easy. *Slow-motion*, Grace, that's the key to the case. Frank Bane gave it to me in his dying words. Thinking about it, I figured it could only have something to do with what Frank and I

talked about the most—bull fighting. Once I got the connection . . . well, with a key there's no longer any locked doors protecting Cuzo. He's going to take a fall!"

"If I doubted it before, after talking to Jorge I know now the police will never do anything to an idol. That's why it's senseless to go on with the case. You were almost killed and . . ."

"In a way, that's part of my job. Not that I expected a pasting—but this one I deserved: I blew my top. Grace, we don't need the police. Your husband was on the target with the vegetarian angle, but he hadn't come to the slow-motion idea which. . . ."

"Toussiant, exactly what is this slow-motion thing?"

"Should be right up your alley. Grace, I've read that in the jungles of the Amazon they have all sorts of unknown medicines, witchdoctor stuff—but medicines which really shrink heads, straighten crooked limbs—things our doctors can't do. Is that on the level?"

"Some of it is assumed to be, although never scientifically proven because such rites are generally kept secret. What makes you bring this up?"

"Because Jose Cuzo is a Campa Indian from the Amazon. He has a brother, probably living there, who flies into Mexico weekly to give *El Indio* something and take out a bundle of the long green. I figure they have a ranch going down there, using Cuzo's money to build it up. But that isn't important—the main factor is the brother flying in weekly *only* during the bull fight season: secretive meetings lasting a few minutes," I said, and went on to tell her all I'd found out in Matilla.

Talking so much left me bushed and when I stopped, Grace said, "How fantastic, a *slave* in this day and age! But I've read reports of slave labor being used in remote parts of the Amazon."

"Grace, remember that dart from a blow-gun? Suppose it had pierced my skin—exactly what would have happened to me?"

"It would depend upon the type poison used."

"Let's say we're in the Amazon jungles—I think they use blow-guns there—what happens to an animal when it's struck by a poisoned dart?"

She still looked puzzled as she said, "Well, the Jivaro, one of the Indian tribes living along the Amazon, use *ampi*, or *curare*, to tip their darts. This is a mixture of herb juices and plants, mostly unknown to us. I don't think science has yet found the antidote for *curare* poisoning, although in minute doses, as with certain snake venom, *curare* can be a useful anesthetic. It relieves heart contraction, high blood. . . ."

"When used to kill an animal, how does it work?"

"It causes paralysis of the muscles, including the heart muscles—and death."

"It's a slow death, then, not like a bullet in the heart where you die in a split second. Now, does this *curare* junk have to be freshly made?"

"I imagine so. Touie—what are you telling me?"

"About a hungry, homeless Indian kid in a strange land who tries to be a matador—without success. Then, either Cuzo or his brother, recall this *curare* bit from their childhood days in the Amazon jungles. A bull is over a half a ton of muscle so it must take minutes for the stuff to kill him—which is just dandy for Cuzo—during those final moments of the bull's life his reflexes will be working in *slow-motion*! That's what Bane meant. The Indian does everything himself, speeds up the ritual—because he only has a few minutes in which to work. Know why he handles his own *banderillas*? That's the only real chance he's taking, for when he plants them in the bull's hump—*curare* juice is on the *banderilla* point! From then on in, the animal is punchy, so Jose puts on a hell of a show, supposedly making all sorts of close passes—but actually toying with a dying bull. The only thing he has to be careful about—that the bull doesn't start wobbling, or die—before *El Indio* runs the sword into him. One day a fifth rate matador—then an overnight sensation!"

"Toussiant, that can be the answer!" Grace said softly, staring at me as if I was made of diamonds.

"It *is* the answer—everything jells. Brother flies in a fresh batch of poison each week. The so-called publicity pitch of butchering the beast himself, eating the heart and hump muscles for strength—strictly Cuzo's cover-up. He can't risk anybody eating the poisoned parts of the animal, becoming sick or dying—exposing Cuzo as a fraud. That's why, when your Juan hit upon the matador being a non-meat eater, the Indian had to have him killed—before your husband began to wonder why Cuzo made such a deal of taking the meat home himself. I think Cuzo knew all the time I was working for you, may have become alarmed when I latched on to Janis. That could have been a poisoned dart which hit my rubber suit, or an act to scare me off. But when I went to Matilla, Jose really got the wind up. I'm sure he saw Frank Bane watching his plane land near Matilla and had him hit by a dart as Frank was driving back to Acapulco—probably to shake Cuzo down, or for all I know Frank had already tried a shakedown. Then, too, the Indian may have thought Frank was working with me. After Matilla, *El Indio* had to put the pressure on, but fast. He sent bangshead to kill me but the clown mistook Janis, sleeping in my bed, for me. Or, they may have decided to knock off Janis *and* me. Hell, everything meshes: the reason Jose never works the Spanish rings—he'd be too far from his supply of fresh poison!"

Grace's tired eyes almost became bigger than her face. "Touie, I'll call in Jorge. . . ."

"No!"

"But with this information. . . .?"

I shook my head, trying to hold in my strength—I still had a lot of arguing ahead of me. "Not only be a waste of time, but a mistake for us. Remember, we have a beautiful theory working, but not a drop of proof. This *curare* stuff is probably only a couple of drops, meaning it will be difficult to find. The . . ."

"But the police could nab the brother as he lands? Cer-

tainly they'd find it, no matter how small a bottle, on..."

"If he saw the police he could easily drop the junk into the Pacific. Suppose the cops collared Jose in the act of planting his *banderillas*? So what? True, *El Indio* would be ruined as a matador, and it would probably cause a hell of a riot, but doping bulls isn't breaking any law, or at most—only a minor rap. We'd still have no real proof Cuzo killed your husband, Janis, or Bane. What are we going to do then, hunt witnesses deep in the Amazon jungle? We'd probably end up dead ourselves, not to mention I haven't that much time. You've heard Lt. Tortela, who's a smart apple—a cop would have to be real tired of his job to even *hint* the idol of the fans was taking a dive. Another thing—if we go to the police Jose will know of it ... retire, jump the country ... or do worse."

"Toussiant, you're mixing me up. You mean we do nothing? Justice should ..."

"Justice is like the cat—many ways of skinning it. You want to nail Jose for murdering your husband. I want him for killing dumb-but-nice-in-her-own-way-Janis. So we get him dead to rights—literally dead!"

"We ... murder him?"

I shrugged. "That's a harsh word, sounds better to call it suicide." I said it carefully, I needed Grace for my final plans.

"She drew away from my bed. "Revenge is a stupid vulgarization of any concept of justice and ..."

"Revenge is sweet!"

"And still moronic. I hired you to gather evidence I could bring to the police, then let them act. I wanted the gossip to stop, so my work. ..."

"A dead Jose will end gossip."

She stared at me for a long moment, then lit another cigarette, her hands shaking. "Toussiant, you puzzle me. How can Janis mean so much to you? What was she but a stupid, drunken ... cracker?"

"Look Grace, I've given this more thought than you may

imagine. Sure, she was all you said—but also an honest human being. And Frank Bane was a windy hustler, but I know why he had to hustle, and whatever he did, he never hurt anybody else. Here—I'm going to have a kid—I'm not certain I want the kid, but that doesn't change the fact I'm going to have one. For my kid's sake I want to rid the world of anybody like Cuzo, making a fast buck and ruthlessly killing whoever gets in his way!"

"Your unborn child is a long way from Mexico. I . . ."

"If the Indian had his way my kid would be born fatherless!"

"Still, sentiment has no place in my work. . ."

"Damnit, Grace, there's more to living than your snakes!" I shut-up abruptly; couldn't put into words what I was thinking—that a Janis, a Fran, even Frank Bane, were alive, *living*, while Grace with her sterile life devoted to 'science' was the living dead.

Almost on the verge of tears she said coldly, "Some day my work with snakes may save your son's life, or his son's!"

I took her hand. "Grace, I'm sorry—I talked out of turn. Let's not fight. I'm not for taking justice in my own hands. But neither am I for letting Cuzo get away with what he's done. There's another angle—we're dealing with a killer. If he's certain we're on to him, Cuzo isn't going to let us live! Do you wish to wake up in the middle of some night with a snake in your bed, or a dart in your breast? That's you—not me!"

"Exactly what is your plan, Toussiant?"

I shook my head, my strength ebbing fast. "We have a few days—until next Sunday when Cuzo fights again. I want you to do three things—be careful; decide if you're with me or not; and read up on this *curare* stuff. Go back to Mexico City today. I'll fly up tomorrow, and we'll talk again. Most important of all—this has to be our fat secret. If one word leaks out—we're dead!" I sweated as I said it—had to trust Grace completely.

"But how can I decide if I don't know what you expect me to do?"

"Just decide if you want Cuzo to die. All I can tell you is—there won't be much danger involved—I think—and we won't do the actual killing. If you want out—I'll try it alone."

"Touie, you're being melodramatic about . . ."

"You're damn right!" I let go of her slim hand. "Consider whether you want to live in terror for the rest of your life and what that will do to your work. I'll be at your house in Mexico City tomorrow for your answer. Again: be careful—try never to be alone!"

"You take care, too. I'll see you tomorrow and I will think it through, of course." Standing up, Grace suddenly reached over and stroked my face. "You think about it, also."

When she left I asked the nurse if Tortela was around. She said he probably was at the bull ring. I said, "I wanted to ask if I can phone New York City."

"That can be arranged."

"Good. Too bad I can't see *El Indio* fight myself. Will he be fighting here next week?"

She looked at a newspaper, told me Cuzo was fighting in Mexico City the following Sunday. All this meant much broken English and hand-talk for both of us, left me exhausted. I was glad it took nearly an hour for her to get an okay on my call—I slept.

Fran didn't sound at all alarmed over not hearing from me. But then, I'd airmailed her a card Monday night, which she probably had received on Thursday—and this was only Sunday.

"Touie, did you get my letter?"

"No. I've been on the move a lot and . . ."

"About flying down to Mexico, I wrote you I . . ."

"Honey, I don't think you should come here."

"But last Sunday you wanted . . . ? Touie, what's happened to us?"

"Fran, Fran . . . things got kind of . . . messy, but I'm on top of the situation now, so . . ."

"Are you in trouble?"

"No. It's . . . You know the water here: I got a small dose of the runs. And . . . eh . . . that's why I don't think you should risk coming down. Look, I'll leave here next Sunday—you meet me at the airport. Darling, believe me, there's nothing happening to us—I can hardly wait to see you—the both of you."

She giggled over the phone. "I don't know what I'm yelling at you for—in my letter I explained I simply can't get the time off and . . . Touie, you're really not sick?"

"Nothing but an upset stomach, and that's over with."

"You phone me next Sunday, let me know when you'll land at the airport, and as I wrote in my letter—we'll take a few days off—but stay around the apartment. Some pregnant women want pickles and ice cream or something as silly—me, I'm burning up wanting you!"

Chapter 10

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LT. TORTELA WASN'T KIDDING about ordering me to leave Acapulco. Monday morning he not only had my bag brought from the pension, but acted as a personal escort while I purchased a new tropical suit, then put me on the plane.

Two hours later I was lunching with Grace. She had decided to play things my way, and I immediately moved into her house—to guard her and keep myself off the streets of Mexico City—any possible run-in with *El Indio*.

Our plan was so simple there was little for us, or at least for me, to do until Sunday. It should have been a soft snap, loafing around and getting my strength back quickly.

But it was one of the most tense and mixed-up weeks in my life. I had great problems to wrestle—including lack of sleep.

Every night I sat up, gun in hand, listening to the radio, reading, but mostly staring at the darkness and thinking. Grace had wanted to move Ophelia out of the other bedroom, back to the kitchen, but I wouldn't have it: with the damn serpentarium down the hall I couldn't sleep nights anyway. At 8 a.m. Grace would get up and after breakfast start working with her snakes—she had agreed for her own safety to skip classes for the balance of the week. Once the sun was out, my nervousness—the aura of evil I felt in the house—left, and like using a 'hot bed' in a cheap rooming house, I would sleep in Grace's bed until she was ready for her afternoon *siesta*. Even the fact Juan Lupe-Varon had died in this very bed didn't spoil my few hours of ear-pounding.

I learned to know Grace a little, and admire her in many ways. Once she had made up her mind to do away with

Cuzo, Grace was cool as ice water, while I was nagged with doubts. She was a many-sided woman, all of them efficient and cold: and if there is such a thing—the nearest I've ever come to a naked intellect.

In the afternoons it amazed and chilled me to watch her—from the distance of the hallway—working with her deadly snakes, handling them with gentle firmness . . . most of the damn nightmares bigger than her arm. Using a forked rod or padded tongs, she would pin a twisting snake down, then calmly reach into the cage and lift it out, holding it firmly back of the head—the snake often wrapping his tail around her bare arm.

Of course, I didn't *have* to watch and listen to all this, I could have walked about outside, or stayed in the living room; but I had this compulsion to be around her when she was working—perhaps to make certain she put them all back in their cages.

Once while examining the scale formation of some brightly colored horror curling under her magnifying glass, Grace said—calmly as some other woman might chatter about shopping for shoes—"I've been trying for months to buy a spitting cobra from an African dealer. But they're so expensive, and even with the speed of plane delivery they usually arrive sickly and bruised."

Grace was also a physical culture nut. Before breakfast I might find her standing on her head for minutes at a time. She was good at fencing but after a few days, to her amazement, I got the hang of it and was able to give her a battle with the foils. But whether talking about Yogi, handling her snakes, exercising, fencing, or experimenting with *curare* for our little feat, she did everything without excitement. I had a hunch nothing could ever get her water on.

I got through the days okay but the nights bothered the hell out of me. I'd sit in the dark living room, gun in hand, one part of my head listening hard for any odd sounds in or outside the house, and the rest of my weary brain thinking furiously—in worn circles.

First there was the doubt as to whether I actually had the right answer to the whole mess. If I was wrong, then what? Some nights I'd sweat out the feeling I was trapped down here, would never see Fran again. I wanted to be with her so much that even if we had a dozen kids wrecking the apartment it would all seem like heaven to me. At such times I'd tell myself I was a damn fool to be hanging around, the hell with all this. What did Janis really mean to me? I didn't have a nickel in her dime . . . but beneath it all I still felt guilty about her death, didn't want to pull out without finishing the job.

But what if we couldn't carry out the plan I had? I even considered a fantastic grandstand play—I'd leap into the bull ring, grab *El Indio* and his *banderillas* before he stuck the bull, insist they be examined. But that was crazy—not only could he stick me with the damn spears—and I certainly didn't want to die proving my theory was correct—but the bull might gore us both. The whole play was wrong: there most certainly would be a hell of a riot, and even if I could prove I was right, it would merely ruin Cuzo's career. That wasn't enough for me—closing my eyes I could see the terror on Janis' death-white face as she staggered out of my room in the pension, swollen tongue choking her. . . . I wanted Cuzo out of this world.

And that was the most racking doubt of all—at times I couldn't see myself walking or riding. . . . For with all my hatred of Cuzo, I knew he was born a slave and I only generations removed from slavery. As an Indian in Mexico he faced the same general problems I had in the States. I could understand only too well what made him tick, as I understood what made Frank Bane a hustler—the same economic drive making colored people do many things . . . such as me being back in the snoop racket. I'd have this terrible feeling I was being an Uncle Tom, doing the white folks a favor, somehow, by knocking off *El Indio*. It was a doubt driving me crazy, and not even the picture of Janis holding her throat, the death in her eyes, or Frank Bane's

corny chatter . . . could completely drive the idea I was betraying my color from my aching brain.

Grace worked hard on her end of the deal and Sunday afternoon we had ringside seats as the packed arena gave Jose, and the other matadors, the usual hysterical ovation. *El Indio* had the first bull and when he walked to the center of the ring, carrying the *banderillas* in one hand and a chair in the other—the fans went screaming-crazy.

“What’s the chair for?” I asked Grace.

“He’s about to try a *silla*, I suppose,” she said slowly, her voice brittle, giving me a puzzled look. “It’s rarely done, requires a type of show-off bravery.”

I was puzzled, too. Why try something risky? *Cuzo must know the guard was slugged!*

Calmly, with both the crowd and the bull watching him, Cuzo placed the chair in the center of the ring, sat down, began waving the *banderillas* as he called the bull. The beast started to trot, then came charging at the seated Cuzo. Standing as the bull came near, *El Indio* took a few feinting steps toward his right. As the bull followed, Cuzo jumped back—placing the *banderillas* deep in the animal’s hump . . . then falling into the chair as the bull charged past.

Glancing around the arena, *El Indio* stretched and yawned . . . while the fans screamed their appreciation. The bull stood at one end of the ring, the gayly ribboned *banderillas* causing blood on the sleek black hump of muscle. The beast was bewildered at what had happened to him, all the noise. Picking up the plain chair, Cuzo strutted across the ring with his cocky, slightly pigeon-toed walk, asked permission to slay the bull . . . then started the next-to-final passes with the cape and wooden sword.

He had things timed to perfection. Grace figured it took exactly four minutes for the *curare* to kill a full-grown bull: which fitted in nicely with the five-minute time limit the matador has to make the kill—once he asks permission.

I couldn’t understand it: first the *silla*, now the cool way

Jose started an arrogant pass with the heavy cape—as if he wasn't the least worried.

He sucked in his gut to let the horn skim past, his face full of cruel contempt . . . the bull's left horn ripped into Cuzo's fancy gold and black vest—but didn't reach the skin. Letting out a collective gasp, the vast crowd turned deathly silent. Grace squeezed my hand. I felt tense enough to explode; expected Cuzo to leave the ring . . . *Now he must understand why the guard was slugged!*

Acting as if he couldn't be so bothered, Cuzo calmly turned his back to the bull, ripped off the torn part of his suit—then faced the animal, waving the cape for a second pass. Jose was trying to make the bull go to the right as he turned with the cape, moving his knees slightly. Rushing in with the force of a wild tank, the beast suddenly hooked his head, goring Cuzo with both horns full in the pit of the stomach!

For a sickening second the bull carried him on his horns, then tossed Cuzo free. The matador got to his feet slowly, left hand pressed to his bloody belly. With a snarl on his hard face, he picked up the cape—flung it toward the bull—daring him to charge!

Moving like black lightning, the bull knocked *El Indio* flat, quickly turned and tossed him again and again—the fans roaring with macabre excitement . . . the animal playing with *El Indio* as if he was a bloody, tackling dummy. I couldn't stand watching it—the bull must have tossed the man a half a dozen times before the other matadors were able to distract the beast. It took time—for the animal hadn't been tired nor *piced*—was actually strong as a bull.

Grace was watching with glazed eyes, face emotionless, but I felt guilty—on the verge of fainting. Then we pushed and battled our way to the emergency hospital under the stands. They wouldn't allow Grace, or any woman, in, but I shouldered my way past the excited punks at the door.

El Indio was on the operating table, naked and bloody, skin a dull tan, tubes running in and out of the terrible

gashes in his flat belly and groin—ragged rips of skin and insides.

They'd given him shots so at least he wasn't feeling any pain, but he was conscious. The sweating doctors were working hard; everybody knew Cuzo was dying—on the other side of the operating table a priest was giving him the last rites in a low sing-song voice.

Towering above the crowd—perhaps it was only my tortured imagination, but I was positive Jose's glassy-drugged eyes suddenly got me in focus. He seemed to raise his hand and point in my direction, for a split second. His parched lips moved . . . I felt he was saying in English—to me—*this is the real moment of truth!*

Cuzo died a moment later with a tight smile on his tough face, dead eyes still staring over at me. The men around the table began moaning hysterically, sincerely crying. Staring down at the dead face I was certain he must have known I—we'd—got him. Even if he somehow hadn't heard about the guard being slugged. . . .

Grace found that curare is a thick syrup, dark brown as melted chocolate, but with a slight bitter odor. It was that simple—after I flattened the guard, while the matadors were in their special chapel beneath the bull ring stands—Grace and I had entered Cuzo's dressing room. We found the real curare in a tiny plastic bottle hidden under a small statue of a saint. Grace had squeezed out the poison, blown in plain chocolate syrup mixed with bitter almond oil—for the aroma.

When the bull had first ripped his suit, El Indio must have realized something was wrong—his stuff wasn't working, putting the bull's nerves in slow-motion.

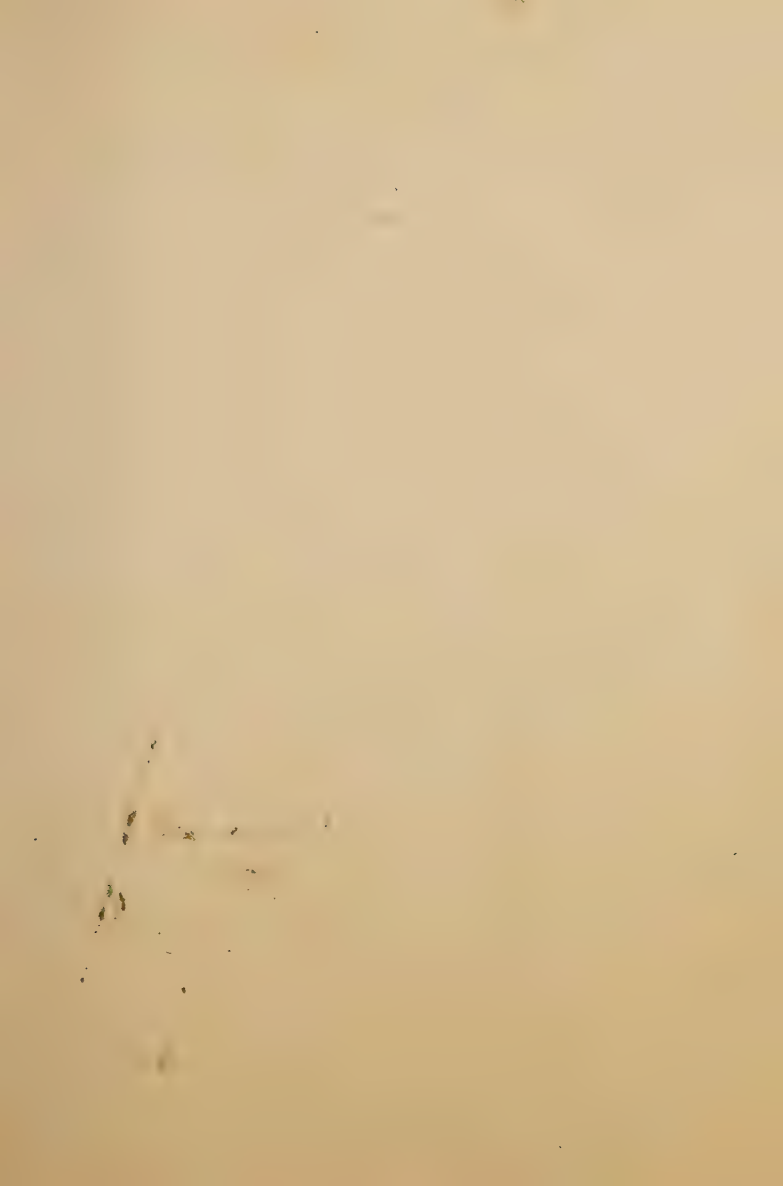
. . . Listening to the shrill cries of grief around me, staring at Jose's hard tan face—darker now in death, I no longer hated him, nor felt sorry I'd done him in. Knowing his *curare* wasn't working, he could have run out of the ring, claim he had an off day—matadors have done that before. But he didn't: even after he was gored, Cuzo had played out his act to the end—bravely, or stupidly, defied the bull.

Call it a rationale, but in a vague way I was glad I had caused it to end like this . . . told myself Cuzo must have been glad, too, or he would have run from the ring. Now the people would never know the truth. *El Indio*, the ex-slave, had died a national hero . . . instead of ending up, in time, as a national punk . . . a fake.



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